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Old Ruff's Protege; or, Little Rifle's Secret.

BY CAPTAIN "BRUIN" ADAMS.



"NOW GET!" ADDED LITTLE RIFLE, STILL HOLDING HIS PIECE AT A DEAD LEVEL.

Old Ruff's Protege;

OR,

LITTLE RIFLE'S SECRET.

BY CAPTAIN "BRUIN" ADAMS.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE UPPER COLUMBIA.

ALONG the shores of one of the branches of the Upper Columbia, a lad was making his way with care and stealth that showed he was on the alert for danger, let it come in whatsoever form it chose.

A casual glance at the boy would have led one to pronounce him about fifteen or sixteen years of age. He was prepossessing and handsome to a remarkable degree. The cheeks glowed with the hue of health, the rose-tint being as fine as that of the sea-shell; the features were almost classical in their regularity; the teeth small and clear as pearls, the eyes large and lustrous, and the hair dark and wavy, but cut quite short. The hands and feet were small and shapely, and a certain careless grace of movement, shown even in his cautious gait, proved that "Little Rifle," as the lad was called, possessed a rare activity, and an extraordinary command of his bodily powers.

His dress was thoroughly backwoods in every respect, consisting of the buckskin leggings rather gaudily fringed and ornamented, the moccasins embroidered with beads, the skirt descending to the knees, and clasped at the waist by a broad belt, into which was thrust a knife, the horn handle only being visible. Within the bosom of the skirt, and out of sight, was a small revolver, intended only to be used when necessity compelled it. A string passing over one and under the other shoulder, sustained a powder-flask and bullet-pouch; but there was no game-bag visible, for the reason that the game the hunters bring down in that latitude cannot be carried very conveniently, especially when the hunter is a boy in his teens.

In the left hand Little Rifle carried a beaver-trap, while a small, silver-mounted rifle rested upon his right shoulder, and was held in place by his other hand.

The day was drawing to a close, and there was a mellowed, subdued quiet resting upon wood and stream that made the hour and the place one of the most attractive imaginable. The branch of the Columbia at this point, flowed quite swiftly, but with a steady, unruffled sweep, that was in perfect keeping with silence and solitude. The banks on either hand were varied by rock, wood, and prairie, the country itself being of the most romantic nature.

Looking off to the east and south, the eye caught a glimpse of distant mountain peaks, standing out white and clear against the blue horizon, like a snowy conical cloud, and the intervening stretch of country was broken by hills, ravines, gorges, wood, stream, rocks and prairie, in an interminable jungle, making a

country that was the chosen roaming-ground of the fiercest wild animals, the most valuable game, and the wild Indian, and the equally wild hunter and trapper.

Turning the eye to the westward, it was greeted with a vision of magnificence and grandeur. In this clear, brilliant air, which makes the climate of Oregon rival that of Italy, there was a sharp, clear distinctness to the Cascade Range, fifty miles away, that would have made any one believe that the distance was scarcely a quarter. Some of the loftiest peaks shone white against the sky, but as they towered aloft, their immense slopes could be seen to be covered with verdure, that was tinged with a misty blue, when viewed through the half a hundred miles of atmosphere.

Little Rifle was moving up the left bank of the stream, with his face turned toward the Cascade Range, except when he darted his quick, wide-awake glances in the direction of the river's bank on his right hand, varied now and then by an equally inquisitive look at the wood and rocks in front and on his left.

"Uncle Ruff told me yesterday that there were plenty signs of beaver further up the stream," mused the lad, as he walked along, "and I know that they have been thinned out down below, so that I haven't had a bite in this trap for three days. I'll set it a mile or two further up, where it will pay to make it a visit early in the morning." And he held up the trap and turned it around before his eyes, as if it were a new thing altogether. It resembled the ordinary "steel-trap," except that it was considerably larger.

The ease with which the lad carried the cumbersome load, attested the strength which this manner of living had given him. Like all little chaps, he was given to conversing with himself, when walking alone, and to-day he seemed in quite a chatty vein.

"Old Ruff went off on a hunt yesterday, and told me he would not be back for several days, and I'm to keep the old cabin till he shows himself again. I've done that often enough to understand it; but I wish he was home to-night."

Something like a shade of sadness passed over the boy's face as he uttered these words. It may be that it was only a natural feeling of loneliness; an evidence of that longing for companionship which at times comes over us all, and is scarcely ever absent from youth.

"I wonder whether Uncle Ruff knows any more of my life than he has told me," he added, following up the vein of thought. "That is little enough at any rate. Years ago, when I was very young, he found me, and hasn't any more idea than have I of who my parents are, and how it was I came to be in this part of the world."

Little Rifle might have continued in this reverie for hours, even after the sun had disappeared, but for the fact that his surroundings prevented. That veteran of the Oregon woods, known as Old Ruff Robsart, had not kept him under his special training for years without accomplishing something. One of his lessons was that when a hunter was outside of his cabin or place of retreat, he should never go to sleep; which in more intelligible language

meant that 'day-dreaming' or reverie, of all things was to be avoided, and the true hunter or trapper never failed to keep every faculty wide awake, on the alert for insidious danger liable at any moment to leap out upon him.

The lad had cast his glance several times toward the other bank, and the result in each case appeared to be unsatisfactory. There was something there which caused him considerable speculation and misgiving.

If we had been there, it is hardly possible that we should have noticed it, but it could not escape the eye of the boy trapper, who, walking more slowly each moment, finally came to a dead halt, dropping the trap to the ground, and wheeling about so as to face the suspicious point.

The stream to which we have alluded was about two hundred yards in width. There were scarcely any trees at all growing upon the opposite side at this particular position, but there was an abundance of undergrowth and a species of long high grass peculiar to the spot.

That which had arrested the reverie of Little Rifle was not the suspicion, but the certainty that something was moving along the bank, beneath the clustering grass. What it was even he was unable to say. It had caught his eye, or rather the indications of it had, when he was a short distance further down-stream. An unnatural agitation of the grass was the sign that caused him to scrutinize it with unwonted sharpness, until, as we have already shown, he paused in his walk and faced directly about.

It would seem, even with what he had learned, that there was little cause for alarm, for there were many ways in which the appearance could be explained. In the first place, as it moved with the current, it might be that it was a log or piece of driftwood that moved tardily, on account of its proximity to shore, and the obstruction of the grass.

And then, if not an inanimate object, what more probable than that it was some beast of prey stealing along in quest of its victim?

Both of these considerations were in the mind of Little Rifle, but were rejected after a moment's thought. His life had taught him to think quickly, and he was not long in making up his mind that there was good cause for alarm.

"Neither logs nor animals travel in that style," he muttered, carefully following the agitated grass and undergrowth, and watching intently for the chance when some inadvertence would give him a more satisfactory glimpse of the object. "It is either a white man or Indian, with the chances altogether in favor of its being the Indian. We are too far up in the mountains for white folks to give us much trouble, and I remember that Uncle Ruff told me to be unusually careful, for he had seen signs of Blackfeet both up and down stream, and if they have been hunting in these parts we can make up our minds that they have found our traps, and are on a hunt for us. I think that one of the Blackfeet is now in the grass yonder."

The wish of Little Rifle was gratified. He had stood but a minute when a mass of tall grass swayed to one side, and, at the same

instant, he saw the prow of a birch canoe stealing as insidiously along as a panther approaches its prey.

"Just what I thought!" exclaimed the lad. "It is one of those Blackfeet that Old Ruff says will follow a man a thousand miles to get his scalp. I'll bet he is after mine."

Whoever occupied the canoe—friend or foe—showed that he was aware of the scrutiny to which he was subjected; for the boat, which up to this time had progressed with unvarying steadiness, now abruptly stood still.

This attempt to remove suspicion was too evident for the lad to mistake it; and with a tact which proved not only his remarkable training, but his native keenness, he took advantage of the "situation," with scarcely a second's pause.

Picking up his trap he wheeled half-way round, and walked directly on among the undergrowth and rocks, and almost immediately vanished from view. His action was precisely that of one who was satisfied that nothing was wrong, and who had resumed the quiet tenor of his way.

But exactly the opposite was the case. He was resolved before venturing further up the stream to find out precisely the nature of the danger that impended. It was one of the maxims of old Robsart never to leave the presence of danger until he had learned all about it.

This stealthy movement of the Blackfoot very probably had a deep significance, which Little Rifle was determined to penetrate, if such a thing were possible.

After walking a hundred yards, and reaching a point where he felt secure from observation, he once more laid the trap upon the ground, and examined his rifle. The latter was a perfect weapon in its way, fitted to carry a ball a great distance with accuracy and was just suited to the strength of the lad. He handled it, too, like one who understood its use, as indeed he did.

Everything seemed to be satisfactory, and in as perfect order as he could desire.

"The gun is reliable," was his satisfied exclamation, as he threw it over his shoulder again; "now, if I ain't mistaken, there's going to be trouble between a boy about my size, and a Blackfoot Indian a good deal bigger!"

CHAPTER II.

LITTLE RIFLE AND "BIG INJIN."

THE sun had long since passed down out of sight behind the Cascade Range, and a sort of twilight gloom rested upon wood and river. Not a sound reached the ear except the faint hollow roar of the forest, and the distant rush of the waterfall, where the river poured over the rocks on the way to the ocean.

Little Rifle moved along with the careless stride of the free, easy-going hunter, who knows precisely where his footsteps are leading him, and what he may expect when he gets there. It was curious, too, to note the silence with which he advanced. The most skillful trailer among the Blackfeet could not have guided his moccasins with a softer rustle, that seemed more like the creeping of the reptile than the motion of the human foot.

The boy did not approach the stream until he had reached a point fully an eighth of a mile from where he had left it, and then it was upon his hands and knees.

Reaching a spot that afforded him the view he was seeking, he peered out from his concealment, directing his eyes at once toward the place where he had last seen the canoe. The distance was so great that even his young, keen eyes were unable to see anything for a moment. Suddenly, however, he exclaimed in an excited whisper:

"There goes the old chap, as sure as the world, and he thinks he is going to git me."

As he spoke, the canoe which had caused him so much uneasiness shot out from the opposite side, and headed directly across stream, the boat, as far as he was able to judge, aiming for the spot where he had been standing.

Little Rifle waited hardly a minute after the canoe came in sight, when he crawled hastily back for a rod or so, then plunged into the protection of the shrubbery and undergrowth, and retraced the very ground over which he had passed but a few minutes before.

This time he went at all speed, for his object was to reach the point ahead of the red-skin. He ran like a regular hunter, with a long, loping trot, his feet sounding like the stealthy tread of a beast of prey, while he kept glancing from side to side in that fashion which seemed to characterize him at all times during his waking hours.

Little Rifle was in good luck this afternoon, for he reached his destination at the very second that he wished to do so.

He heard the dip of the paddle, as the canoe made its way through the swift current, and a moment later the Blackfoot's head came to view, as he propelled the canoe swiftly forward. Entirely unsuspecting of danger, he ran the prow of the boat hard against the shore and almost at the same instant leaped out.

As Little Rifle was thus afforded a full view of the red-skin, he was sure that he had never seen a more repulsive creature on two legs. A dirty blanket lay in the bottom of the canoe, and the hair, instead of being gathered in the ornamented tuft or topknot, hung entirely loose and straggling about his shoulders. The face itself was daubed and plastered with differently colored clay, mixed with grease and some other compound that made the copperskin the very acme of filth and ugliness. The countenance by nature was as hideous as possible, being seamed with small-pox, while the nose was of enormous size, flattened out to an immense width, by the process which has given this tribe their distinctive name among the hunters and trappers of the West.

There was the imprint of a villainous nature upon this same countenance. It was stamped so clearly that it could be seen and read through all the dirt and grease that was smeared over it.

As Little Rifle looked upon the Blackfoot he felt also that he was gazing upon the face of a murderer, one who would bury his tomahawk into his brain with a little compunction as if he were a wild animal.

The lad had concealed himself behind a rock, and held his rifle cocked, aimed and at his

shoulder, so that the body of the red-skin was covered, and our hero had but to pull the trigger to send the dark soul into eternity.

But he did not do so, for he would have felt that he too committed a crime, in thus shooting down a human being like a dog.

The Blackfoot, after stepping out of the boat, turned about to draw it further up the bank, and, as he did so, he laid his rifle upon the ground so as to permit him to use his arms with greater facility.

This was the opportunity for which Little Rifle was waiting. Taking one step from behind the rock, so as to bring his body in full view, he called out:

"*Kil yi!*"

Like a flash of lightning the red-skin turned so as to face the sound, and doing so, saw the rifle not more than twenty feet distant, pointed straight at his breast, and with the finger resting upon the trigger. It was, indeed, only a hair's breadth between him and eternity.

Accustomed as was the savage to the most desperate emergencies, he was completely taken off his guard by this unexpected turn of events, and for a moment he stood like one transfixed.

Then he began, almost imperceptibly, to lean his left side over, preparatory to making a sudden snatch for his gun; but Little Rifle was too thorough a scout to lose the advantage he had gained by his superior wit.

He had learned considerable of the Blackfoot tongue from old Ruff Robsart, and he now made the best use of it. Detecting the purpose of the red-skin on the instant, he called out:

"Stir a foot or hand and I will shoot!"

Such a command was not to be mistaken, and the savage straightened himself with a suddenness that made him appear ridiculous. Men like him have too much dread of death to invite it by any direct means, and treacherous and vindictive as he was, he comprehended his danger in all its fullness.

"Now get!" added Little Rifle, still holding his piece at a dead level, and closing one eye, as if to convince his enemy that he was determined to make no mistake in the aim.

This peculiarly American expression, naturally enough, was not very clear to the red-skin, who stood motionless and undecided as to what was expected of him.

"Move off; go away from the canoe!" said the boy accompanying the order by a swinging motion to the left, that did not lessen his command of aim, and, at the same time, made his meaning perfectly intelligible.

It went against the grain to obey the order, but there was no question but that Little Rifle was master of the situation, and he had the nerve to hold his vantage-ground. Noting the hesitation of his captive, he made a shifting motion, as if he had decided to fire. This was enough, and the Blackfoot, with one sidelong bound, landed nearly a dozen feet to the right of his canoe, and kept on walking, as if he had concluded to leave such an uncongenial neighbor altogether, but our hero was not quite ready to give his permission.

"Hold on!" he commanded, in the same authoritative voice, and the Blackfoot did hold on, wheeling about and staring at his master

with an angry, defiant expression, which said, as plainly as the words:

"What do you want now?"

Keeping his body covered by the muzzle of the deadly little weapon, the boy now advanced a half dozen steps, so as to bring him far nearer to the canoe and rifle than was his foe, then halted. Feeling himself undisputed master of the field, he showed a boyish propensity to use his authority.

"How are you on a walk, old chap? You look greasy and dirty enough to slip along without any trouble. Now turn your face to the Cascade Range, and travel. I've heard some of your chiefs say that their home is in the setting sun, and now you can go hunt for it."

As there was no need of such extreme caution, now that the Blackfoot was deprived of his weapon, Little Rifle lowered his gun, and emphasized his words by appropriate gestures.

"Your face is toward the sun, and now travel; keep it up for a month or two. If you look back, I'll pull the trigger without waiting to give you a chance to sing your death-song. Go!"

Not Weston himself could have surpassed the gait of the red-skin, as he obeyed this peremptory order. Turning his broad, flat face to the Cascade Range, he started off like a hen-pecked husband, who suddenly discovers that it is a little past the hour when he promised to be in the bosom of his family, and he has good cause to dread the consequences of his forgetfulness.

Little rifle stood smiling and amused, never once removing his eyes from the dusky scamp, until he disappeared from view in the wild, rocky ground that made the bank of the river.

"Now, as he has left, I will do the same," concluded Little Rifle, and placing his gun and that of the Indian in the canoe, he shoved it into the water, sprung in and took the paddle.

And, as he did so, he proved himself as much at home as when setting his beaver-traps and pursuing the game through the fastnesses of Oregon.

Turning the head of the boat toward the other shore, he sent it skimming over the swift current with as much speed and skill as the Blackfoot Indian himself had displayed.

"If I could only feel that he would keep on walking for a week or two, I wouldn't think any more about the red-skin," he mused, as he glanced back toward the shore he was leaving so rapidly behind; "but I don't think he will forgive me for what I did."

It was the purpose of Little Rifle to throw the Indian entirely off the scent, so that when he reached his cabin he could rest and sleep in peace. The gathering darkness was in his favor, as it made the task of giving him the slip so much the easier.

When the lad was about the middle of the current, he turned the prow down-stream, and the little boat sped like an arrow, seeming to skim over, without touching, the surface, resembling the sea-fowl in its flight.

Not doubting but that the Indian was on the watch, the boy had recourse to this simple stratagem to get rid of him. The little river was very winding and rapid, and the canoe went spinning around these curves with a be-

wildering velocity that was enough to drive any red-skin mad who attempted to follow.

When this was done, and scarcely any twilight remained, he shied the boat toward the other bank, at a point where a solid rock offered firm footing. Springing nimbly out with the two guns in his grasp, he kicked the boat out into the stream again, and it went dancing onward like an egg-shell.

"There, if that red-skin wants to chase that canoe, he is welcome to do so," he muttered, to himself, as he saw the tiny vessel vanish from view in the gloom; "and if he finds out that I have jumped ashore, let him hunt my trail."

And with this satisfied conclusion, he turned about and deliberately left the river behind. He felt he had very cleverly outwitted the Blackfoot Indian, and that he had scarcely any occasion to give him further thought.

"At any rate, there is no need of holding him in mind between now and sunrise," he mentally added. "I have come a good long tramp from the old cabin, and the moon will be well up in the sky before I can make it. I only hope that Uncle Ruff has got back from his hunt and is awaiting me there, with a good steaming supper, over which we'll forget all about Indians."

Ay, that were well if the Indians would only forget all about them!

CHAPTER III.

FLITTING SHADOWS.

LITTLE RIFLE struck off homeward, like one who feels that he has little time at his disposal. After walking full a mile, he struck another stream smaller than the first and which was a tributary to the one he had just left. The banks were made up principally of rocks and gravel, over which it was very easy to pass, without leaving any trail behind. The lad made his way over these, with the care of a veteran hunter, and at length stepped down between two rocks, that towered fully twenty feet from the ground. Between them was a passage of about a rod in width, which gradually narrowed as he advanced, until he was checked by what seemed an insuperable obstruction, but this in reality was the cabin, and "home," toward which he had been journeying.

It was made with very little regard to "style;" the rocks themselves afforded the rear, and two sides. The roof was constructed by laying saplings and branches across the top and covering them with leaves and twigs to such a depth that they afforded an impervious protection against the inclemency of the weather. The interior was divided into two apartments, the partition being formed, mainly like the front, of buffalo and bear-skins, firmly fastened to poles.

Thus a secure and comfortable retreat was afforded, no matter how great the cold might be. Within were piles of the richest and choicest furs, including those of the beaver, otter, fox, marten, bear and buffalo. Some of these were exceedingly valuable, being rich, glossy and of velvety softness; for Old Robart was as thorough a trapper as he was a hunter, and he had a collection of peltries already secured.

that, when put in the market at San Francisco, would bring him a little fortune in its way. The furs were all the best of their kind, for he was too good a connoisseur to accept any of a second-rate quality. Many a time, he took the beaver out of the trap, examined him a moment, and then let him go in peace, until he could get in better condition, by which time, also, the sagacious animal was sure to be cute enough to keep clear of all contrivances intended to entrap him, all of which Old Robsart could not fail to know, but which did not affect his line of conduct, as there were surely a thousand times more fur-bearing creatures in the Northwest, than a regiment of trappers like him could hope to capture.

No fire was ever kindled within this primitive home; for these downy furs kept so much of the natural heat of the body that the most cold-blooded need not be uncomfortable. The fire needed for cooking purposes was always made somewhere else.

Little Rifle's anxiety now was to see whether his friend and patron was at home before him. Knowing that there was always a possibility of some treacherous red-skin lying in wait, in the cabin, he paused when some distance away, and gave utterance to a sort of whistle that was always used as a signal between him and his friend.

To his delight the signal was instantly answered from within the cabin.

"He is there!" he exclaimed, running forward, along the gorge. "Hello, Uncle Ruff!"

The round full moon was shining from an unclouded sky, so that objects were seen quite distinctly for a considerable distance. As he spoke, the form of a man of goodly size, with immense flowing beard, drew the buffalo-skin that answered for a door aside, and stepped outside. His dress was somewhat similar to that worn by the lad, except that instead of his jaunty hat, he wore a close-fitting cap of fur. He was a man of great strength and activity, and seemed to be in the very prime of vigorous manhood, although evidently verging on his sixty years.

"Wal, my little 'un, you're back again," he said, as he looked kindly down upon the lad, and reached out both his hands to grasp his. "Hello! you've got two guns have you? What does that mean? Have you been assassinating some traveling gunsmith?"

"No, Uncle Ruff, I took that from a Blackfoot Indian."

"Found him asleep, I s'pose, with that 'ere piece hung up at the head of his bed."

"No I didn't, either," continued Little Rifle, parrying the taunts of the grim old hunter, who always delighted in quizzing him. "I took it away from a red-skin that was wide awake as you are."

"Oh, that's it; I s'pose he'd been eating green persimmon or tough babies, that give him the chollywobbles so as to double him up with pain, and make him not care whether you took his gun, or his head. Why didn't you bring his scalp? 'Cause he wouldn't let you, I s'pose. Let me take a look at the gun and see whether it's good for anything."

After turning it over very deliberately in his hands for several minutes, trying the lock and

seeing that it was loaded, he pronounced it a "tollyble weapon." And then, throwing aside his jesting words, he asked Little Rifle to give him the particulars of his encounter with the red-skin, and listened with great attention until he had finished.

"You behaved like a hero," was the comment of old Robsart, when he had finished, "and I think have fairly 'arned your supper. Ef you keep on improving at this rate, I'll make a hunter of you in the course of seventy-five or eighty or ninety or a hundred years. Come in to the banquet."

Little Rifle was as "hungry as a bear," and he accepted the invitation on the instant. Drawing the buffalo-robe aside, he saw a tempting, luscious supper awaiting him upon a ledge of rock, about a foot from the ground, on the center of which sat a lamp, giving out quite a clear light from the oil that the old hunter himself had extracted from some of the animals he had captured in his traps. Without loss of time, the two sat down, and began devouring the meal, chatting in the meanwhile, like old friends who had not seen each other for many days.

"I've been on quite a tramp sence yesterday," said Old Ruff, with his cheeks swelling out with the juicy meat. "I went a good many miles up the stream, and I used my eyes."

"Did you find the beavers any more plenty, than they are here?"

"Yes; ten thousand times, that is figgeratively speakin', as the preachers down in the settlements say. Peltries is plenty, but as is ginerally the case, the red-skins are as thick as grasshoppers, and they kept me dodgin' round like a bull in fly time. We've got to send down to 'Frisco, for a lot of lamps to carry 'round at night, so as to keep from tumbling over 'em, and when we ride our hosses toward the fort, we've got to set a lamp on each ear to keep from stepping onto 'em. I think I masbed a dozen or two of 'em, without knowing it, 'cause I mind me now that I stepped onto something, two or three times, that felt kind of soft."

"They are strange creatures, Uncle Ruff, and I can't understand why they should hate the whites worse than they hate the rattlesnake under their feet."

"I s'pose 'cause the whites feel just as lovely toward them. You see it's a squar' deal all round."

"I know but I can't see any reason in it. There was that Blackfoot to-day. He must have seen me when I climbed up on a high rock to take a look at the surrounding country, and the very minute he saw me, that very minute he went to work to get my scalp. They are a strange people."

The scarred face of Old Ruff expanded into a quaint smile, as he looked fondly down in the countenance of the lad and listened to his words. Then, laying the long, bony finger of his right hand into the palm of his left, as if to call special attention to his utterances, he said:

"Yas, younker, you're right. I've hunted wild animiles and fit Injins for a good many years, and I've come to the conclusion that the red-skin is a qu'ar critter, and it takes a good while afore a feller understands him. Some chaps come out here fur a few weeks and think

they've got the hang of things, when they don't know no more about copper-skins than my grandmother does about tannin' grizzly b'ars. You know they ginerally call the Injun red, but when he gits on the war-path he's allers a 'yeller.' They believe in spooks, and when the spirit moves 'em they move the spirits. They don't like crooked paths, and generally take everything straight; they are very hospitable, and often treat their captives to a hot stake. This is very touching, 'specially to the captive. They're purty good shots, as you know yourself, Little Rifle, 'cause you've see'd 'em shoot the rapids; they are good on drawing a long bow, but often take an arrow view of things, and I knowed an old chief once that lived half the time upon arrow-root. Some younkens like you think an Injun is the very beau-ideal of a man, as they say down in the settlements; but sence they've l'arned the use of guns they've hung up the fiddle and the bow, which must harrow the feelin's of the varmints a powerful heap. My nephew that knows how to read books calls him 'Lo, the poor Injin', and I agree with him, for ef thar's any lower critters in all creation, I've never see'd 'em. Sometimes you can tame an Injin, and sometimes you can't. They say an Injin never forgits a kindness, and I s'pose they don't, fur if you're kind to one of 'em he'll hunt you for a week, and never give up till he gets a lock of your ha'r to remember you by. The only trouble is that when he takes the lock he's mighty sartin to take all thar is on your head."

"Then I suppose, Uncle Ruff, that the fellow I started off on a walk won't be likely to forget me very soon?"

"Not much; and while you're 'bout it, you might jist as well hold him in remembrance. You see, Little Rifle," continued Old Ruff, resuming his supper, "I never b'l'ieve in murder—not at all; but when you've got your gun p'inted at a red-skin, and don't feel like pulling the trigger, it's a good idee to shet your eyes, hold your gun steady, and sneeze. When a man has his finger on the trigger and onexpectedly sneezes, the gun is purty sartin to go off. I found that out when I was a little younker, and had a bow and arrer sighted at my dear old grandmother, wondering how near I could come to the end of her nose without hitting it, and not intendin' to shoot at all. The old lady jist then had her snuff-box out, and I s'pose some of it got into my norsetrils, fur I fetched a sneeze that like to have blowed my nose off, and when I got over the a'rthquake that had shook me to pieces, I see'd my grandmother picking up the only three teeth that she had left from the floor. Afore I could ax her pardon, the old man came in. I remember he had been digging in the garden, and carried a spade in his hand. Wal," added the old joker, with a sigh, "I won't describe the incidents that follered; suffice it to say that I warn't able to set down for two weeks, and I don't s'pose I'll forgit that little episode as long as I live."

"Perhaps if I live all my life in these woods," said Little Rifle, in a voice of unconscious sadness, "I may come to look upon life as you do; but I cannot do so just yet."

"You ain't going to live here all your life," said the hunter, with such abruptness that the

lad looked up inquiringly into his face, as if he failed to get the full import of his words. "You're getting to be quite a likely-sized youngster, and it's time that you see'd something more of the world than you can see in these parts, though a chap can see a powerful sight when he looks toward the mountains. I'm going on East arter the summer is over, and I'll take you with me. You'll see sights then that I reckon will make you open your eyes."

"There is one sight which I often wonder whether I shall ever be given to look upon."

"What's that?"

"My parents—my brothers and sisters—if I have any, and something seems to tell me that I have. I tell you, Uncle Ruff, that strange dreams often come to me, not by night only, but by daytime. Sometimes when I am gliding over the stream in my canoe, or following the windings of the river, I forget your caution about keeping my wits about me, and I fall to thinking of the past, and of the future. I have done it of late very frequently, and a feeling comes over me that I can hardly describe. It has settled down into the belief that something strange is going to happen—something which is to change the whole course of my life, and make me really another person."

"What is it going to be?" asked the old hunter, looking at the lad, with a scared look, as if he dreaded the reply.

"I have no more idea of its nature than have you, but I know it's coming, for all that. And then too," he added, with more animation, "by my trying so much to think of the past, I have succeeded at last."

"What!" exclaimed the astonished hunter, moving away from the table, "what can you call to mind?"

"I remember when you found me. I was lying asleep upon some furs in an Indian lodge, when I opened my eyes, and saw a man dressed in a hunter's dress, leaning over me. I remember that I was so frightened that I cried, and you took me up in your arms to quiet me, and you carried me away with you."

"That's it exactly," replied the hunter; "and the qu'arest thing about that business was that when I come to that lodge, standing by itself, there wasn't a red-skin to be seen anywhar near. I walked in, picked you up, and walked away ag'in, and never cotched so much as a glimpse of a copper-skin. I went back arter a month or so to see if I could l'arn anything, and found the lodge burned to the ground."

"How far was that from here?"

"Hundreds of miles up along the Saskatchewan, on the trapping grounds of the Hudson Bay Company. You see arter I got hold of you, I took such a fancy to you that I was afeard some of the red-skins would make a hunt fur you, so I emigrated, and come down into Oregon. Arter I got here, I felt troubled thinking maybe your parents or friends might be up in them parts. So I left you with some friends at Fort Abercombie, and went up there to find out."

"And learned nothing?"

"Nothing at all; I spent a month in trampin' over the grounds. You know that part of the country isn't very thick with white folks, and

such as they be are hunters or trappers. I went to the forts, and every place, where I could find any of 'em, but never a word did I l'arn. When I fotched you away, I see'd that little rifle of yours hung up over your head, and knowin' as it was meant for you, I fotched that too. I expected to l'arn something from that, 'cause you know thar ar' two letters carved onto the stock—the letters 'H. R.', and I s'posed by that means I'd git some track of the owner—but it wa'n't any use, and I give it up at last. But what I want to ask, my pet, is whether you can't call up anything *afore* I come into the Injin lodge and took you away?"

"You know how hard I've tried, and once or twice, it seems to me that I have succeeded. It is a dim picture of riding over a deep broad river, with a good many people in the boat, and it seems to me that some of them were of my own color, and I think, though you know that it is all guesswork, that my father and mother were among them; but the picture is so dim and faint, that when I try to fix it in my mind it slips away again, and all is dark."

"Can't you think of any thing else?—some-
thin' different from that?" asked old Robsart, with the most intense interest.

"Nothing beyond that; all is blank. Of course, I remember the several times you left me at the fort, and the kind men there, who taught me how to read and a great many other things, but my memory is able to do no more. Some time it may succeed better."

"Wal, I hope it will," said Old Ruff, with a sigh; "it 'u'd go hard with me to part with you, and I'd only do it fur your own good; but these woods ain't the place to fetch up a younker like you. You're smart 'nough, and handsome 'nough to deserve better things. Old Ruff has got a little pile of money stored away in one of the banks down in Frisco, and if your friends don't turn up, afore the summer's over, we'll see what that can do fur you, my little pet."

"No matter what may happen in the future," said Little Rifle, in an affectionate tone, "no matter where the rest of my life may be cast, or what good or evil fortune may befall me, I can never forget *you*, who rescued me from the savages, and have always been more than a father to me."

"That's all right," said the old hunter, hastily, and speaking as if he were swallowing something that kept rising in his throat, "that's all right, and don't say nothin' more about it."

For a long time they conversed in this familiar manner, and then Little Rifle, as was always his practice, when with the hunter, kissed him affectionately, bade him good-night, and withdrew to his own apartment, which, it will be remembered, was at the other end of the lodge or cabin, where he was never disturbed or molested during his sleeping hours.

Old Robsart sat on the outside of his humble cabin for fully two hours more, wrapped in deep 'bought.

"Qua'r," he muttered, after awhile, "but when I was huntin' to-day, the same feelin' come over me. I know I'm going to lose Little Rifle, in some way or other. It'll go hard with me—but I hope it will be for the best."

And with this conclusion he rose to his feet, passed into the cabin, and retired to slumber.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VENGEFUL BLACKFOOT.

A BEAUTIFUL spring morning dawned upon the Northwestern solitudes, in which the two characters of whom we have made mention had their home. Scarcely a cloud flecked the sky, that looked like the deep, brilliant azure of Italy, and the soft murmur of the distant waterfalls, and the song of thousands of birds made the scene one of gladness and joy. The day would have been warm and sultry but for the breeze that came stealing down from the snowy peaks of the Cascade Range, diffusing coolness through thousands of square miles of adjoining territory.

By the time the sun was fairly above the horizon, old Robsart and Little Rifle emerged from their humble quarters, and moving down the narrow passage between the rocks, debouched upon the shore of the stream which has already been mentioned. Here a small canoe was found, into which both entered, the old hunter taking the long ashen paddle in hand, and sending the little vessel up the turbid current with as much ease as if it were upon still water.

Few words passed between the two, for the communings and dreams of the previous evening were still with them. The appearance of Little Rifle was of one who had slept very little during the night, and the old hunter, understanding the cause of his reverie, forbore to intrude upon it.

This excursion was to visit their traps, their practice being always to do so before partaking of breakfast.

Several hundred yards' steady pull, and the boat came to a rest against the grassy beach, and old Ruff stepped out, drawing the prow of the boat up after him. As he did so, the boy made a motion as if to follow him, seeing which he waved him back.

"Stay whar you be, Little Rifle, for I won't be gone long."

He paused, and looked up questioningly in his face.

"Don't you want me to help you, Uncle Ruff?"

"I'd like to have you along, but I guess you'd better stay thar. You know thar be only three traps fur me to visit. When we halt further up, thar'll be a half-dozen, and you can help."

"All right," replied the lad, settling back in the stern of the canoe, ready and willing to wait.

"It will be better to leave the younker alone, at any rate, till I come back," muttered the trapper, as he strode away. "Thar ain't many o' the varmints in these parts, and the way he got along yesterday shows that he knows how to take care of himself. Let him think, let him dream, and mebbe he'll be able to work out the mystery that I can't see head nor tail to. Thar's a good deal in that handsome head of his'n, and he'll pitch it out arter awhile."

Left to himself, the boy reclined in an easy position, with his head lying back upon the stern of the canoe, and his eyes looking directly

upward at the sky, across which a few white feathery specks of clouds were now beginning to drift. The soft ripple of the stream, as it washed against the bank and around the little boat, the faint murmur of the forest, and, above all, the thoughts that had haunted him since the talk with the old hunter—all these conspired to throw a languid, dreamy spell over the lad, such as sometimes comes over one, when only partially awake.

"Uncle Ruff tells me that he is going to remove me from this place, before winter comes again, and I can not tell whether his promise gives me most pleasure or pain. I feel that I ought to leave here, for my own nature tells me that this is not the way in which my Creator intends that I shall live. What I have learned at the forts, and what he has told me, has given me some idea of the great world which moves around me; but I shrink back from stepping into it. It must be that while this sort of life gives one a certain kind of courage, it also makes him a coward. I could meet the deadly Blackfoot with more courage than I could step into the streets of that wonderful city of San Francisco—that old Robsart calls Frisco. And yet, I suppose I would become accustomed to that, too, in time. If my dream of last night comes true, a change will come very soon. I mustn't forget to keep my wits about me," he added, with a sudden start, as if he were going to make amends for his temporary forgetfulness.

Looking at the opposite bank, up and down stream, and off in the direction taken by the old hunter, he saw and heard nothing suspicious. All was as still and undisturbed as if this solitude had never been trod by the foot of man or animal.

"I guess everything is all right," he concluded, as he lay back again, and gave way to the fascinating reverie that was continually stealing upon him.

And, lost in these weird dreamings—these vague imaginings, Little Rifle became utterly oblivious to what was going on around him. He forgot that he was reclining in an Indian canoe, with no one standing sentinel over him; the lessons of the old trapper were lost upon him, and his mind was almost in the condition of the opium-taker, who really dwells apart in a world of his own.

And as he reclined thus, with his vacant gaze fixed upon the blue sky above, the undergrowth along the bank, scarcely a rod below him, noiselessly parted, and a figure came to view.

It was the Blackfoot Indian of the day before, whom the lad had conquered and dispossessed of his rifle. He had no gun as yet, but the muscles of the bare right arm were ridged from the pressure of his fingers around the handle of the gleaming tomahawk. The hideous face glowed with the white heat of exultant passion, as he looked upon the lad and realized how completely the tables were turned.

Standing for a moment, with his head craned forward, as if to make certain that he fully comprehended the situation, he began advancing, with the stealthy, silent tread of the cat upon the beautiful bird, never once removing his glittering eyes from his victim.

A dozen feet away, he paused. He stood on the very spot he desired, and from which he could drive the keen-edged tomahawk crashing through the skull of the unconscious lad.

Little Rifle still lay in the dreamy reverie, his hat having fallen from his head, and the short, curly auburn hair resting on the gunwale, while his clear rose-tinted cheek looked more handsome and attractive than ever.

Can no hand be outstretched to save him? Uncle Ruff is still a half-mile away, attending to his traps, and his arm is powerless to prevent the dreadful tragedy. Who, then, shall interfere?

The Blackfoot is not the one to wait. Slowly he draws back the hand that grasps the tomahawk, and with his eyes fixed upon the marble-like forehead, aims directly at the brain of the dreaming boy!

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

THE Blackfoot paused only long enough to make sure of his aim, when he concentrated all his mighty strength in his terrible right arm and hurled his tomahawk with a tremendous force that would have cloven through the birchen sides of the canoe and the skull of the boy like so much pasteboard, had the glittering weapon sped true to its aim.

But it went fully a dozen feet over his head, whizzing far out into the stream, into which it fell with a loud splash.

And the reason for this was that at the very instant he threw his power into his single arm, there was a sharp crack from the wood, and a bullet went crashing through his brain. With a howl and spasmodic clutching of his limbs, he staggered forward and fell upon his face, dead.

It was a frightful awakening from Little Rifle's reverie, and he leaped out of the canoe, landing several feet away upon the shore, with the belief that he himself was mortally wounded. Staring wildly around he saw the body of the dead savage, and the second glance identified it as the one who had hunted him the day before, and who had been so cleverly outgeneraled.

Walking toward him the boy saw in what manner he had been slain, and then he understood what it all meant. This treacherous red-skin had attempted to steal upon and kill him, when the saving bullet had averted the fatal blow.

"It is fortunate that I had Uncle Ruff so near at hand," he concluded, with a feeling of heartfelt gratitude, as he looked about in quest of his friend. "Another moment and it would have been the end of me."

Little danger of his again falling into the slumber from which he had been so rudely awakened. Holding his rifle in hand, he looked about, ready for the coming of white or red-men; but to his surprise he saw neither.

"I do not know why Uncle Ruff persists in remaining away so long," he mused, after he had waited some time in this manner; but, fifteen minutes more passed, when the familiar form of the old trapper debouched from the wood, bearing upon his shoulder the skins of three

beavers which he had taken from his traps. To each was appended the tail, which forms one of the choicest tidbits of the hunters of the Northwest.

"Didn't I hear a gun?" asked old Robsart, the moment he came within speaking distance. "It sounded down in these parts and— Hello! you fatched the old chap at last, did you?" he exclaimed, abruptly, pausing and staring at the inanimate form of the Blackfoot.

"It is the same red-skin that I told you about last night."

"So I reckoned the minute I looked on him. Don't it prove what I said? That 'ere chap has been huntin' 'round after you ever since you started him toward the setting sun. He's like a wolf, that you think you've got off your trail, when he starts up ag'in arter you've furgot all about him. He's hunted night and day for you, and arter he sot eye on you he watched and waited for his chance; but he didn't make out anything by the game."

"No; his career has ended to a certainty. That was a most fortunate shot of yours."

"What yer talking 'bout?" demanded the trapper, staring savagely at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"Why, I mean that rifle shot of yours that killed the Blackfoot, just in time to save me."

"Me! hain't I just got back from visiting the traps, and hain't pulled a trigger this mornin'?"

It was now the turn of Little Rifle to be amazed, and the questions and answers that immediately followed revealed the fact that the bullet that stretched the Blackfoot low had not been fired by the old trapper, nor could he or the boy tell from whose friendly gun it came.

This added a new element of interest to the situation. The old trapper went to the prostrate body, and after examining the wound, and knowing the posture of the red-skin when about to throw his tomahawk, he declared that the ball had come from the other side the stream, at a point almost opposite where they stood.

"And let us see if we kin find out who done it," he exclaimed, flinging the peltries into the canoe; "jump in and we'll paddle over."

Only a few seconds were needed to carry them to the other shore, where they made a minute search for their friend, frequently calling out; but they neither saw nor could they find any traces of his presence there.

"It's a lucky spot, anyway," said the old man, "so we'll start a fire, and have our breakfast afore we go any further."

The fire was started in a few minutes and breakfast made of the beaver tails to which we alluded. The startling incident afforded them abundant material for conversation, and for the time drove all thoughts of the more important subject from their minds.

But, when the meal was concluded, Old Ruff said:

"Now, Little Rifle, I'm goin' to make the round of the traps, and will fatch in all the furs and peltries thar's to bring. It's gettin' so close to hot weather, that purty soon the skins won't be worth the gatherin'. I think we'll make a move further up-stream to-morrer, fur all the varmints are so thick thar, and we'll snatch all

that we kin. You see, this yer Blackfoot pokin' round in these parts makes it look as though some more of 'em mought be here and thar."

"But you know that this one made special search for me, and no doubt is the only one that has ventured so far as this."

"Precisely, my boy; but you mus'n't forgit that when you first coteched sight of him, he was coming down the river, as though he was looking fur you then. What I want to git at is to find out whether any of the varmints are very close. You kin go round by the falls, and make a good search. Take the day fur it, if you need so much time, but make it sure."

"All right," replied the lad, springing to his feet. "I'll try and be back by night, but, if I don't you'll understand the reason why."

And humming a merry tune, the boy struck off into the wood, and almost instantly vanished from view.

Young, strong and in perfect health it was scarcely possible that he should not be in the best of spirits. There is something in the clear, brilliant, pure air of the Far West and Northwest, that penetrates a man's system like the electric current.

Added to this was that strange, vague, fluttering hope that had risen in his breast, and which as yet he could scarcely comprehend, but with the passing of every hour, the conviction grew upon him that he was upon the eve of a great crisis in his life history. It was a verification of the old legend that "Coming events cast their shadows before."

The day was as beautifully clear as the preceding one, and the lad moved through the solitude, with an elastic step, that proved that there was no unwillingness upon his part to assume this task, which it may be supposed was attended with no inconsiderable danger.

"How strangely I was rescued," he muttered, as he walked along. "Heaven sent my unknown friend at the very moment; had he delayed his coming a moment longer, I should not have been here. Uncle Ruff is pretty shrewd, but he can not imagine who the man was, except he thinks in a general way that it was some hunter who has happened to stroll down this way; but there is something which he don't understand in the way he takes himself off after firing his gun, without waiting for so much as a word of thanks from us. I am glad that Uncle Ruff has sent me off on this scout, for it seems as if I were going toward my friend, with a good chance of meeting."

The dense woods through which the boy had been making his way thus far, now assumed a different character—being much more open and broken, while the ground was rocky and hilly—the face of the country being such as is found in a place where the rivers and streams can only make their way by passing through deep gorges and canyons.

Pressing forward in this manner, Little Rifle at last found himself upon quite a lofty ridge, which gave him an extensive view in every direction. It was indeed the post of observation, whither he had directed his steps from the first.

With characteristic caution, he screened himself from observation as much as possible by climbing to the top of one of the scrubby oaks.

and then making a long and careful survey of the suspicious territory.

Only a single hasty glance was cast back over the region from which he had just come, as that was under the guardianship of old Robsart, who needed no assistance from him, in a work of that kind.

But he looked to the westward, where hundreds of miles of the vast solitude opened before him. It was a scene made up of rock, stream and wood in all their varied beauty, such as would have won the eye, in a loving dream, of any painter.

Here and there he could trace the winding course of the streams, starting on their long journey to the far-away Mexican Gulf. In many cases these streams would be visible for the better part of a mile, and then would be hidden from view by the rocks and woods that interposed—only for a time, however, as they soon shot into sight again, white with bubbles and foam, into which they had been beaten on their furious, plunging way through the gorges. In two places these torrents disappeared into deep, narrow canyons, above which hung a mist, that threw back a faint prismatic reflection in the bright morning sunlight.

And so the vision extended, the streams diminishing to tiny silver threads, the woods and rocks melting into a dim, smoky haze, until far away toward the magnificent snow-crowned Cascade Range, which to the imaginative boy seemed the wall that shut him in from the world.

"Beyond that lies my future," he muttered, giving utterance to his romantic imaginings; "when shall some one come to lead me through that gate? Must it be Old Ruff himself who is to start me upon that road, of whose end I cannot dream? Away up yonder, on the slope of that mountain-chain, nestles the little fort that was built many long years ago by the Hudson Bay Company, and there I have spent much of my time receiving instruction from the kind-hearted men there. I wonder whether any of them ever suspected—'Sh!'"

He paused suddenly, and placed his finger to his lips as if to shut back from his own ears the words he came so near uttering. With a deep flush upon his handsome face he glanced furtively around, as though affrighted lest the wind should have carried it to some ears.

"I must be careful," he added in a whisper, with the same startled look; "they say that trees and rocks have ears. No one knows that secret but old Rob-art, and he would sooner be shot and scalped than reveal it. I cannot see the fort," he continued, looking so far as his vision would permit over the vast area of country that intervened, "but I could make my way to it in the night time. Yonder is the river that I am to reconnoiter, and yonder are the falls where Old Ruff suspects are Indians—and yonder are the Indians, too!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE STRANGE CANOE.

LITTLE RIFLE uttered this exclamation in the voice of one who is certain of what he says, as well he might be; for, as he fixed his eyes upon the swiftly-flowing stream as it swept onward

toward the thunderous falls, his vision also roved along the bank toward its source far up in the mountains.

The stream was a little less than a mile from where he stood, and quite a distance above the falls alluded to were visible three Indian lodges. They stood upon an open piece of land immediately back of which were rocks and ravines, and were close to the edge of the river flowing by their very base. They were of the usual character, made of barks and skins supported upon poles that were stacked like muskets, the lower ends being a dozen feet apart, while they interlocked at the top, where an open space was left.

From the top of one of these lodges issued a thin, shadowy column of smoke, so faint and vapory that it could only be seen when the eye was directed fairly toward it.

This was the only evidence or sign of life that met the gaze of the boy, and it seemed rather to add to the loneliness of the immense solitude spread out before his eyes. The smoke showed that there was some one, out of sight, in one of the lodges at least; but in the distance the river had a solemn, quiet flow, and the roar of the waterfall below, mellowed and subdued by the distance, was in perfect keeping with the scene.

"Yes, there are the Indians," he added, as, perched in the tree, he gazed long and searchingly on the scene; "they are there, though my eye can not see them, for those signs are too plain for any one to mistake."

Reasoning upon his knowledge of red-men, he concluded that one of these marauding bands of Blackfeet, that are still encountered in the Far West, had halted here for a few days to engage in hunting, and most probably in salmon-fishing; for, as is well known, the Columbia and its tributaries abound with this fish, which is eagerly sought by both white and red men.

The danger to be feared was, that these Indians, hunting and fishing in the vicinity, would discover signs of the proximity of the two trappers and hunters, and, to use a common expression, would "go for them." As bad luck would have it, also, they were directly between the present trapping-grounds of Old Ruff and Little Rifle, and those to which they had concluded to move their traps. Consequently, they would be pretty certain to encounter "Indian" in uncomfortable profusion, wheresoever they might choose to locate.

The lad, from his perch in the top of the oak, looked down upon the scene for fully a half-hour, in the expectation of seeing some movement upon the part of the Blackfeet. All that time the thin, light-colored smoke crept up through the funnel-like opening, but not a solitary red-skin showed himself.

"It must be that they are off on a hunt," concluded Little Rifle, as his patience at last gave out; "and if they have left their squaws behind, they are asleep. Anyway, I must learn more about them."

And acting upon this resolve, he descended the tree and struck off in a direct line toward the river. He knew well enough that if he should return to the old hunter with no more knowledge than he now possessed, he would be chided

for performing only a part of his duty, his maxim being that a reconnoissance that was incomplete was worse than none at all, as it created all manner of doubt and distrust, without suggesting the remedy. The intervening distance was traversed without difficulty, Little Rifle not forgetting to exercise great care in his movements, as always became a person in the presence of danger.

The point where he struck the stream was without any wood at all, but was lined with broken, jagged and irregular rocks, among which he managed to pick his way without exposing himself to any suspicious eye that might be on the alert upon the opposite side.

He had kept his bearings so well that he found himself directly opposite the three lodges, which were thus scarcely a hundred yards distant, and in the best view he could possibly desire.

"They must be a sleepy set over there," he concluded, as he ensconced himself in a position to keep ward and watch; "that is, if any one is there, for I don't think a soul has stirred outside since I first saw them. Hello!"

His curiosity was suddenly and unexpectedly gratified, although, as it speedily proved, in a way that was not entirely satisfactory.

A single Blackfoot Indian, that looked like the twin brother of the one who had met his doom a few hours before, walked out of the lodge from which the smoke was issuing, stretched and yawned, and walking to the edge of the stream, looked up and down for a moment, as though expecting some one or something, and then deliberately walked back again, and disappeared from view.

"That looks as if he had come out to wash his face, and had become disgusted," laughed Little Rifle. "I think a good scrubbing would be sure to kill him. I suppose, now, he will go to sleep for the rest of the day."

One of the essentials of a good scout, both in civilized and savage warfare, is a patience that can bear the test of hours. The Esquimaux, who sits by the air-hole in the ice without stirring a muscle, even if the seal does not thrust out his nose, is the beau-ideal of a patient scout, although he is too much of a porpoise himself to get impatient.

Young as was Little Rifle, he was the possessor of this quality, and had displayed it to a remarkable degree on more than one occasion; but it will be remembered that the circumstances were exceptional to-day, and he was in that feverish, uneasy condition of mind which at times made him, as it were, another person.

At any other time he would have centered his attention on the three lodges across the stream, and kept it there until the sun went down, despite hunger, cold and discomfort, but he could not do so now. It required such an effort upon his part to withdraw his mind from that tempting reverie, or day-dreaming, which had so nearly proved his death, that he was dissatisfied, and felt that he must be moving, and that he must do something, or the burden would become unbearable.

What precise form this relief would have taken, it is hard to conjecture, but most probably the lad would have ventured to cross the

stream at a point further up, so as to get still nearer the lodges; but this perilous proceeding was happily prevented by a most unlocked-for diversion.

While keeping his attention, as a general thing, fixed upon the most suspicious part of his view, he remembered that some of the owners of these lodges were away, and there was no telling by what route they might return. So he bestowed an occasional glance up and down stream, not forgetting that he might be lying in their very path.

It was something like fifteen minutes after the disappearance of the Blackfoot when Little Rifle chanced to look up-stream, and saw a small Indian canoe suddenly shoot to view.

There was nothing particularly striking in this, but there was something extraordinary in what he discovered the next moment. A single person was holding the guiding paddle, and instead of being a Blackfoot Indian, as he had expected, it proved to be a white boy, apparently his own age, or but slightly older.

He gave but little motion to the oar, as the current was rapid enough to make it unnecessary, and his principal occupation was in guiding the frail bark.

The appearance of this stranger, as may well be supposed, filled Little Rifle with the most profound amazement, as it was the first time in all his life that he had seen a boy in this section of the country, and coming to view so near to where the Indians were, caused no little inquiry and speculation as to what it all meant.

He supposed, of course, that the lad was on good terms with the Indians, else he would not have shown himself so near them; but this belief was speedily dispelled by the actions of the lad himself.

While yet some distance up-stream, he suddenly caught sight of the lodges, and instantly showed the greatest consternation—seizing the paddle and dipping it deep into the water, as he made furious efforts to cause it to ascend the stream again, as though he hoped to pass out of sight around the curve above.

But he was utterly unable to overcome the current, and only succeeded in slightly checking his speed, the manner in which he handled the paddle showing that he was quite a novice, with a skill that could not compare with that of Little Rifle.

When the boat had drifted down to a point nearly opposite the lodges, its inmate seemed to discover that he was wasting his strength, and he turned about again so as to face the dwelling-places of the dreaded red-skins.

Not one of them showed his face, and the boy, pausing a moment to regain breath, headed the canoe directly toward the point where the excited Little Rifle was watching his actions; but this seemed to give no more satisfaction than the other course, for, in case he succeeded, it would compel him to land directly opposite the lodges, where the chances of his being seen would be doubly increased.

As the best thing that could be done, he resorted to a rather curious artifice. One hurried glance toward the Blackfoot dwellings showed him that he still remained undiscovered, whereupon he instantly lay flat down, so that he

could not be seen by any one upon the bank, and in this posture he let the canoe go, trusting to good fortune to carry him by in safety.

Little Rifle was on the point of calling to him, and volunteering his assistance, when he concluded that his voice would be pretty certain to attract the attention of the keen-eared savages in the lodges, and thus endanger the safety of both. Accordingly he remained quiet.

There is something in solitude that attracts one human heart to another, and when Little Rifle saw the canoe gliding by, he determined to learn something of its occupant. He reasoned that he was not likely to be alone in this wilderness, and that strange, dim, vague feeling came over him, that caused the expression of his thought.

"It may be that he is the one sent by Heaven to lead me through the gate that now shuts out the great wide world. I will yield to the impulse that leads me toward him."

And, at the same time, a shy, bashful emotion restrained him from moving away at once.

"I will wait and see whether he is fortunate enough to get beyond sight of the lodges without discovery."

And he again crouched down behind the rocks, and with an anxiously-beating heart waited to see what the result of this perilous mishap was to be.

The strange canoe had something like a half-mile to pass before a curve in the river would shut it from view of any one who stood upon the shore where the Blackfoot had shown himself. The probability was that the boy, after getting fairly below the lodges, would work his boat in to shore, so as to get out of the dangerous range as speedily as possible.

The little boat kept in the middle of the current, the occupant persistently remaining out of sight, and Little Rifle, after watching it for a few moments, would look directly across the stream, dreading to see the painted Blackfoot issue forth, and repeat his survey.

Further and further drifted the little boat, until it looked like a duck floating at will upon the water. But, if the Indian sees it, he will recognize it on the instant, and then there will be trouble. The lad does not intend to land, and must remain in view for some time longer.

The minutes dragged slowly by, and it appeared as if the tiny vessel remained absolutely stationary upon the surface of the water, although Little Rifle knew that it was still going forward rapidly. At the distance he could not identify the lad, even if his head was above the gunwale, and our hero was beginning to wonder what his conduct could mean, when he observed that the canoe was gradually edging to one side, as if it were creeping in toward the land.

"But it is not," he added, as he carefully scrutinized it, "it is passing around the bend in the river, and will now be lost to view in a few minutes, and then all danger will be over—Heaven save him!"

CHAPTER VII.

A FEARFUL ADVENTURE.

AT this moment, Little Rifle chanced to look across the stream, and instead of one Blackfoot,

he saw two come forth from the middle lodge, and sauntering to the edge of the river, pause, and, while gesticulating and conversing earnestly, they first looked up the current and then down again.

"They will see the canoe! They will discover the lad and he will be lost!" was the agonized thought of the little fellow, who, turning his gaze in the same direction, just managed to desecry the boat as it glided out of sight around the bend in the river.

The Blackfeet indeed acted as if they had discovered something suspicious; for one of them pointed down-stream, and the other, following the direction indicated, seemed to be gazing intently, as though his keen vision had detected the same thing.

Little Rifle could plainly hear their guttural voices, as they spoke in louder and more excited tones, but he was unable to catch or comprehend a word they uttered. Fortunately they remained in view but a few minutes, when they turned about and strode into their lodge at a much more rapid gait than they had employed in leaving.

The watcher behind the rocks was determined to wait no longer. Extricating himself as carefully and hastily as possible from his station, he placed himself so far away from the stream that he felt secure from observation in case the Blackfeet should come forth again, and then he hurried down the river with all the speed of which he was capable.

Sinewy and active as was the boy, he made rapid progress, and shortly after came back to the margin opposite the point where he had last seen the canoe, and, as he did so, a sudden terror almost took the breath from his body.

For directly below this bend were the falls of which we have made mention, and of which he would not have thought again, even at this moment, but for the overwhelming roar that broke upon his ear as he emerged from the forest where the sound met with no obstruction.

He cast one hurried glance down the stream, and gracious Heaven! what did he see?

There was the canoe, still near the center of the stream, and within a hundred yards of the falls, toward which it was rushing with the speed of a race-horse.

But the occupant was no longer asleep or insensible to the frightful peril of his position. He had evidently awakened to a sense of his dreadful danger the instant he had passed around the bend in the river, which not only gave the rush and whirl a terrible power, but showed him the surging current, and the mist rising from the churning foam below.

From one danger into a greater, he had striven with the desperation of despair to bring the canoe out of its plunge into destruction; but had either broken his paddle or had lost it; for he was now using his rifle as a substitute, grasping the barrel and driving the stock through the water with a fierce rapidity, that proved that he understood that his life depended upon his success.

That one terrified look showed Little Rifle that it was beyond the power of the poor lad to accomplish the task, and that he was only insuring his destruction by continuing the effort.

"Throw your gun down! jump overboard, and swim for land! It is your only hope!"

These words were shouted by our hero, who swung his hat aloft and screeched like a madman. It may be that his clear, musical voice possessed such a penetrating power that they reached the ear of his strange friend in his extremity; for he ceased his frantic efforts and turned his white, imploring face toward him, as if to thank him for the warning, even though it could aid him naught.

"Jump! jump! I tell you!" called out Little Rifle, rushing into the water to his knees in his extreme solicitude, "throw your gun aside, and you can do it. Wait a dozen seconds more and you are lost!"

The boy did wait the dozen seconds. He must have understood the words that were shouted to him, for he sat back in the stern of the canoe, folded his arms, and looking intently at Little Rifle, sadly shook his head, and then raising his hand, waved it in greeting toward him.

And as he did so, he could not have spoken more plainly had he used the words:

"I understand your advice; but it is too late! I must go over the falls to my death, and goodbye!"

It was a strange and impressive sight to see this mere boy, after fighting so bravely against fate, meet his doom with the stoicism of an Indian war-chief. There was no wailing or outcry, no frenzied flinging of himself in the boat, as it might be expected that such a one would do, when he saw himself gliding so swiftly and irresistibly toward death; but he sat back in the position we have described, and after his salutation to Little Rifle turned his face away, and looked at the waterfall before him.

The action of the doomed lad awed and thrilled the heart of Little Rifle, who felt that it was no ordinary character that he saw before him; for not one boy in a thousand could meet death with such heroism. For one instant the agonized watcher closed his eyes to shut out the dreadful sight, and then yielding to an overmastering attraction, he leaped back out of the water and dashed at headlong speed down the bank, over rocks and through undergrowth, until he reached a point directly below the falls, from which he could look up and see the vast sheet of water as it poured over the ledge into the seething, furious hell of foam and froth below. Here he paused and gazed upward.

The river just before making its final plunge was compressed into a canyon-like passage not more than one-half its width a hundred yards further up. This deepened and gave it far greater velocity, the current shooting forward like a mill-race, the surface being covered with little eddying waves, as if they were sensible of the awful caldron into which they were so soon to make their boiling plunge. But the entire volume, sweeping forward with an indescribable grandeur and majesty, moved over the ledge in a solid, compact body, fully a dozen feet in depth and without a break. Descending perhaps a rod, in the same solid volume of a deep-green color, it could be seen the outer surface of this mass began to assume, here and there, a white, feathery appearance, which rapidly in-

creased, until, something less than a hundred feet below, it resembled an Alpine avalanche—all of a glistening, snowy white. Here, where the water was arrested, there was a perfect pandemonium; the billows turning and rolling over each other, throwing the blinding spray far up on both banks, while a thousand currents and counter-currents struggled and fought with each other with such desperate fierceness, that it was not until the stream had reached a point several hundred yards away, and had expanded into its usual breadth, that it assumed anything like its natural appearance.

The din that filled the ears of Little Rifle, as he stood on a flat, projecting slab of rock, where his clothing was speedily saturated, was enough to drive an ordinary person frantic, although it scarcely affected one who had spent such a portion of his life in the wilderness as had he.

But here he might have shouted his voice away, and not the slightest sound would have been heard even by himself. He could do nothing but stand and watch and wait, with that freezing terror all through his nerves that made him feel as if he must forever remain rooted to the spot.

"But where is the canoe?" he thought, when it seemed to him that he had been waiting an interminable period, while from the very nature of the case, he had been there only a few seconds. "Could it have gone over while I was making my way to the spot? No, that can not be, for I almost flew. Oh! is there no hand to save him?"

At that instant, Little Rifle caught sight of the canoe, as it glided swiftly out to view, seeming to poise itself for a moment in mid-air, like an eagle balancing himself for his earthward sweep, and then the boat, with its brave occupant, shot downward, with a velocity that seemed almost to baffle the eye.

It appeared as if the water as it swept over the ledge of rocks was of unusual density, for the canoe rested on the surface, like a feather, as though it had lost all weight.

Little Rifle saw the prow, following the curve of the river, turn downward, so that it stood perfectly perpendicular, the white-faced but resolute lad who occupied it grasping the sides with his hands so as to maintain his place.

In this way it made the descent, for, perhaps, fifty feet, when the stern, probably retaining the momentum longer than the lighter bow, advanced so much further that the canoe turned a complete somersault, both it and the boy shooting from view in the roaring, plunging and churning hell of waters at the bottom of the falls.

"Lost! lost! gone to his last account!" gasped Little Rifle, recovering from the paralysis in which he stood up to this instant. "He showed that he was a brave lad, and he deserved a better fate—There! can it be?"

Although, as we have shown, the efforts of the poor boy to work his canoe in to shore and out of the frightful current failed, yet it resulted, despite the appearance to the contrary, in getting quite a distance toward the bank whereon Little Rifle stood, and he noted the fact, with some surprise as it came over the falls.

As he stood on the wet rock, looking at the foaming abyss before him, something dark shot up to view almost at his feet. Looking downward, he had just time to see that it was a part of the canoe—about a half—when it drove out of sight again, in the resistless grasp of the current.

And the same glance that showed him this, showed also the face of the boy who had made the fearful plunge, only for an instant, like his view of the canoe. The face, white and motionless, rose from the water, and then sunk out of view, as it sped down the current, with scarcely less speed than the river possessed directly above the falls themselves.

That one look was sufficient for Little Rifle. A sudden hope came to his heart that the lad might still have the breath of life in his body, and placing his gun upon the rock at his feet, he concentrated all his strength and made a leap directly toward the spot where he had seen the face, shouting at the same time, with all the strength of which he was capable, in the hope of arousing him to do something for himself.

The most skillful swimmer can not fight his way through froth and foam, its specific gravity being too slight for it to support his weight, while the danger is that he will be strangled before he can reach the water that will support him. Little Rifle fully understood this before he made his daring plunge, but the glimpse that he had obtained of the boy had proved that he had something in his favor that fully counterbalanced this. The very violence of the foamy waters was such that it drove all foreign bodies to the surface for a second or two, without any effort upon their part.

Little Rifle kept his senses about him, as he felt himself sinking downward, downward, in the resistless grasp of the current. He had taken a deep inspiration during the instant he was making his flight through the air, and he now held his breath until he could gain the chance to renew it.

The crash and roar, the blinding mist and spinning eddies, the arrow-like descent, these were enough to drive all the wits from a man's brain, and the boy had hardly thrown himself into the vortex when the conviction flashed upon him, that the strange boy was not only past all hope but that he had put himself in the same position by his mad plunge into the water, in the hope of rescuing him.

But Little Rifle was too brave a lad to yield up his life without a struggle, and, with all the strength and skill of which he was master, he made a desperate effort to get his face to the surface only for a second—a single instant—that he might gain a single breath of the all-revivifying air.

CHAPTER VIII.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

AT this instant, while Little Rifle was making such a tremendous effort to save himself, his shoulder struck something. He supposed that it was a canoe, or that he had grazed a rock in his meteor-like passage through the water; but, the wild hope that it was neither of these, caused him to throw out his arm and clutch at it.

As he did so, he found that he had grasped the arm of the boy, for whose sake he had made this desperately perilous attempt.

Having got it in his grasp, Little Rifle did not let it go again, but held to it, as though his own life depended upon the result, while, with the other arm and his feet, he redoubled his efforts to make the surface of the turbulent current.

The very velocity of the sorely-pressed stream was in favor of the lads, as it carried them speedily into water heavy enough to afford a swimmer support; but, before this was done, and when the brave rescuer felt that he could hold out no longer, he brought himself and his burden to the top of the water.

Even in this critical, this fearful moment, when it seemed that his own body would burst with agony, Little Rifle made certain that his companion was given the same blessed privilege before he availed himself of it. He saw him start and gasp, he felt the arm which was in his grasp feebly start or struggle, and then, with the lungs of both filled with the delicious life-giving air, they went down again.

In that momentary sight that Little Rifle had gained of the face of the boy, during the single instant that it remained above the water, he caught sight of a red spot of blood upon the forehead, which showed that he was hurt and bleeding very fast, else the crimson current could not have shown itself so quickly.

In a shorter period than before, the two came to the top of the water again, and Little Rifle, with a thrill of hope, found that they were beyond the light, fleecy foam, and were speeding downward through water in which he was able to support both himself and his charge.

The skill of the young trapper was as great in the handling of himself while in the water as it was in hunting or trailing through the woods, and now his confidence came back to him, when he felt certain that he could accomplish something by that same skill and strength.

Still retaining his hold upon the arm of the boy, he managed to bring his head above the surface once more, while with the other arm he impelled both through the water, toward the bank, from which he had made his leap.

The current was still so swift that he could hardly hope to effect a landing until they should reach a point further down, but it was prudent to put himself in a position where he could avail himself of the first turn in his favor.

Looking again at the countenance by his shoulder, he saw that the eyes were closed, and there was blood flowing over his face.

The sight convinced Little Rifle that he must speedily be gotten out of the water, if he expected to preserve his life at all, and he now bent all his efforts toward reaching the shore with him.

A few vigorous strokes brought him within a dozen feet of land, but the bank was so rocky and precipitous that it was idle to attempt to come out, and he drifted, unresisting, still further.

By this time they were scarcely less than a quarter of a mile below the falls, so swiftly had they sped downward, and being so close to shore, Little Rifle determined to make a desper-

ate attempt to land at the first point that offered the least hope.

Suddenly he saw an opening in the rocks, a place where they were so depressed that he could reach the upper edge with his hands, if he could bring himself sufficiently near.

A furious plunge forward, and he succeeded. Throwing up his free arm, he grasped the rim, but the swiftness of the current, and the support of the helpless lad, instantly tore his grasp loose, and both sped onward again.

"I'll make it next time," was his thought, as his courage rose with the difficulty. "The stream is broadening, and must run a great deal slower. I will soon find a footing, and when I can secure that, I will bring us both out all right. He is alive," he mentally added, as he looked at him again, "for he has struggled more than once, but he is badly hurt, and he may die, after all."

Just then, Little Rifle's moccasins struck the bottom, and, as they were drawn up, his efforts at swimming, this showed that the water was quite shallow. Instantly dropping his feet, he stood with it rising scarcely above his waist; but even then it was the utmost he could do to retain his footing, so powerful was the sweep of the current.

He succeeded by a strong effort, and never losing his hold upon his charge, dragged him to shore and stretched him out at full length upon his back, where the sun could shine full upon his face.

The boy lay like one that was dead, with his eyes partly closed, and the blood trickling from the wound in his forehead. For a moment the heart of Little Rifle seemed to stand still, as he believed that it was all over with him, and he knelt down to make sure.

Examining the wound, he found that it was much less serious than he had supposed, the bone of the forehead being unbroken. It had probably been caused, not by striking the jagged point of a rock in his fearful descent, but when driven about by the whirlpool or current, his head must have grazed some of the numerous projections, causing only a superficial wound, where, in the other case, instant death would have been the result.

Little Rifle tore a piece of the fringe from his hunting shirt, and with it endeavored to stanch the flow of blood. As he pressed it against the raw wound, the forehead of the lad contracted as though with pain. Little Rifle paused for an instant, and then did it more gently than before. At this the sufferer opened his eyes, looking up with a vacant, bewildered stare, like one recovering from a sound sleep.

His attendant now raised his head upon his knee, and endeavored to rouse him to consciousness.

"Cheer up my young friend, you are past all danger now; you have had a trip that you can boast of as long as you live. How do you feel?"

But the faculties of the boy were knocked up too much for him to comprehend his situation. He mumbled something that was unintelligible, and then closed his eyes as if to sink into a slumber.

Little Rifle was at a loss to understand what

this meant but he feared it was a bad sign, and now that he had begun, he determined to arouse him to a full sense of his position. He shook him quite violently, all the time speaking in a loud voice, and fighting off his drowsy tendency. The lad had swallowed a large quantity of water, which, having thrown out, he began to show some evidence of his returning faculties.

Looking steadily in the face of Little Rifle, he glanced at the rapid river flowing by at their feet, and then seeming to comprehend, for the first time, he spoke with some coherence.

"And is it possible that I came over these falls and live to remember it? It cannot be possible: it is incredible."

"But it is true for all that," replied Little Rifle, with a smile of delight. "You have a slight wound upon your forehead; but if that is all, you will soon be all right again. Just examine yourself and see whether you have any other injuries."

The boy stretched his limbs, and with some assistance got upon his legs, hobbling about for several minutes.

"They are in order, and it seems I haven't got anything broken but my head."

"Nor that either," said his friend, his pleasure showing itself in his radiant face and the tone of his voice. "You have had a great shaking up, but it was a most wonderful escape. You will go with me to my home and remain with me until you recover your strength, or until you are anxious to go."

"Your home?" repeated the stranger, in amazement; "have you a home in this wilderness?"

"Come with me and you shall see," replied Little Rifle, flushing and dropping his eyes with confusion to the ground.

"All right, lead the way, only don't walk too fast, for I feel a little rheumatic in my joints, and can't get along fast."

As the boy hobbled forward again, leaning upon the arm of his friend, something dropped from his bosom, and as he stooped to pick it up, he said, with a laugh:

"I lost my oar, hat and gun, but the spy-glass stuck by me to the last, perhaps because I could better afford to part with that than any of the others."

"We will go back by the falls," said Little Rifle, "for I left my gun there when I jumped into the water. Then we will take the nearest cut home, and get there, I hope, in the course of a few hours."

"See here," said the other, pausing for a moment, "ain't there any Indians there?"

"I will look out for them," was the reply; "but tell me how it was you came to be alone in your canoe on the river."

"I will tell you as we walk along, for it is quite a long story. What is your name?"

"They call me Little Rifle," replied the lad, with no little embarrassment of manner, "and, if you please, you may do the same."

"An odd name, but rather pretty. You may call me Harry Northend. I don't suppose you remember ever seeing me before?" he asked, in a significant manner.

"Of course not," returned Little Rifle, greatly surprised. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I have seen you before!"

CHAPTER IX.

NEW FRIENDS.

LITTLE RIFLE and Harry stood side by side on the margin of the stream down which the latter had made his frightful plunge, and from which he had been rescued by the daring young trapper.

"Yes," repeated Harry, with a meaning laugh, "I have seen you before, if you haven't seen me."

"I am sure you are mistaken," replied Little Rifle, embarrassed at his persistency. "I have lived among the mountains and woods ever since I can remember."

"And that's where I saw you," added Harry, who seemed to recover his strength and spirits with remarkable celerity. "I wonder, now, whether you were not lying in the back part of a canoe, this morning, half-asleep, without suspecting that a big Blackfoot Indian was creeping up to you with his tomahawk in hand."

And Harry laughed as if he had just heard the funniest joke of his life.

A light began to break in upon the mind of Little Rifle. How could his new acquaintance know anything of that incident which neither himself nor Ruff Robsart had told to any one?

"You are the one that fired the gun that saved me!" he exclaimed, reaching out to take the hand of Harry.

"I believe I am," replied the latter, as he returned the grasp. "I happened to be hunting along that creek when I caught sight of your canoe, and I stood trying to make out whether you were an Indian or a white man. I was going to call to you two or three times, but I thought you were a red-skin, as the hunters call them; for you know I couldn't see your face, and you were dressed very much like one. Just as I was about to turn away I caught sight of the Blackfoot stealing toward you—and you know the rest."

"But why didn't you wait and speak to us? We crossed over to hunt you out, but Old Ruff himself couldn't find your trail, even."

"I took pains to travel over the rocks and stones as much as I could so as to keep you from finding my tracks. I didn't wait to see this Old Ruff that you are talking about, because I still believed that you were an Indian belonging to some other tribe, and I couldn't bear to see you killed in such a cowardly manner, so I made myself as scarce as possible."

"But how, then, do you recognize me now?" asked Little Rifle, in wonder, "when you say you didn't see my face?"

"By that cap, which I did see, and which isn't the kind of plug an Indian sports."

Little Rifle laughed at the lively, off-hand manner of his new friend, who seemed to have forgotten entirely his recent terrible experience.

"Well, then, since you would not give me the chance then, I will take it now, and thank you from the bottom of my heart for the service you did me, when without it I should have been killed."

"Of course it was a good turn, but then it can't

compare with your act. I didn't run any particular risk, while you knew, when you jumped into the raging water, that the chances were altogether against your ever coming out again. However, we won't fight over such a dispute; we're bound to be friends for life, so give us your hand on it."

And the two shook hands warmly, in a way, too, that showed they meant it.

"I tell you, Little Rifle, there is something about you that I like," in his dashing, captivating style. "You've got pluck, and I like to see that in anybody, and then you're as modest and backward as a girl; you haven't got the brass and style and vices of civilization, and I hope you never will, and so it don't spoil you when I tell you that you've got the handsomest face I ever saw on a pair of shoulders—"

"There! there!" protested Little Rifle, flushing to his temples, "please don't go on in that way, but tell me something about you: self."

"Well, I suppose I ought to. You know what my name is; my father has an interest in the Missouri Fur Company, and has come out prospecting in this part of the world. We came up the Missouri and Yellowstone as far as the boat could travel, and then, with a party of hunters, made the rest of the journey on horseback. So, you see, I got considerable experience in the woods on our way, though I haven't had much chance to learn how to manage one of these confounded canoes. We reached Fort Abercrombie, which I suppose you've heard of, about a week ago."

"Yes, I have been there several times."

"Well, from there father concluded to make a trip up into British America, and gave me the choice of staying where I was, or of going with him and his party. I found out from the men at the fort that there is a great deal better hunting in Oregon than there is further north, so that is how I came to stay behind."

"And is it possible that you are so far away from the fort without some hunter or trapper who knows the country being with you?" asked Little Rifle, staring at him in amazement.

"Why not?" he responded coolly. "Father didn't forbid me to go out hunting, but rather encouraged it. I find there are a few more waterfalls and Indians than I thought, but I am getting used to them. Since you've told me your name, Little Rifle, I call to mind, too, that I have heard it at the fort. Old Ruff, as you call him, the noted old Hill Trapper, has you in charge. Isn't that the case?"

"You are right," replied Little Rifle, as they picked their way along over the rocks, in the direction of the falls. "I have lived with him ever since I can remember."

"But he is not your father?"

"No; nor can he tell me who my parents are. Many years ago, when I was an infant, he took me from a deserted Indian lodge. I was left at the fort, while he made every effort in his power to find out something of my history; but he has never succeeded, and is as ignorant of it to-day as you are."

"It is wonderful," said Harry, deeply impressed with the romantic narrative; "were you dressed in Indian clothes at the time?"

"Were there no marks by which some trace of your parentage could be gained?"

"None at all," replied the young lad, with a sad shake of his head. "I do not even know my name."

"How is it that they call you Little Rifle?"

"When old Ruff Robsart took me out of the Indian lodge, there was a small gun, beautifully mounted, suspended over my head, which he brought away with him, and kept until I was big enough to begin to use it. At the fort they christened me Little Rifle, and the name has stuck to me ever since."

"Where is the gun now?"

"I laid it upon the rocks when I jumped into the water to help you out, as I would have been sure to lose it. I am on my way now to recover it."

"It would be hard for me to guess where mine is," laughed Harry, with a half-quizzical look at the falls, which were now close at hand. "As a paddle, it wasn't much of a success, and I don't think it fared much better than the canoe."

"We have a spare rifle or two at the cabin, and I shall be glad to present you with one. In fact you have a claim to one of them, for it belonged to the Blackfoot that you shot this morning, and looks like a good piece, though it is of the regular size."

"And so was the one I lost. Father bought me a couple of boys' guns in St. Louis, and I lost one in the Yellowstone, when I was watching to get a crack at some wild-fowl."

"What became of the other?"

"I kept that till we had left the Yellowstone, and were well on our way over the mountains. I got tired of carrying it slung over my shoulder, where there wasn't any chance of getting a crack at anything like game—so I had it strapped to the back of a mule, and he took it into his head one day to roll over without waiting for his load to be unstrapped. When he had finished, my gun was in seven different pieces. Then I took an ordinary rifle, such as the men carry, and have gotten along with that ever since."

"Yonder is mine," said Little Rifle, pointing to where his weapon lay; "wait here until I return, and you can examine it for yourself."

With these words the lad bounded forward like a chamois, and picking up his piece, brought it back to Harry, who took it into his hand to examine it.

"A splendid gun," was his comment, as he turned it over and over in his hand; "but, hello! what does this mean? There are two letters, 'H. R.', engraven on the stock."

"They were there when Old Ruff found it. Neither of us know what they mean."

"They must be the initials of the man who owned the gun. No doubt he was your father; I see his surname begins with R., but I don't suppose it can be Rifle, like yours."

"No; hardly that," replied the boy, compelled to laugh at the manner of his companion.

"There must be thousands of names that begin in the same way, so those letters have been of no help at all to us."

"Not at present, but when I go back to the fort, I'm going to set out to find who you are,

and where you came from, and I'm never going to go back East until I do learn."

As Little Rifle heard these words, the longing, strange yearning came to him, and he could not avoid asking himself the question, whether this friend was not the instrument sent by Heaven to introduce him into the world, and to unlock the mystery that shrouded his history.

His declaration of what he intended to do, stirred Little Rifle's hopes, and as he looked furtively at the boy, he saw his lips compressed and his eyes flashing, in a way that proved how deeply in earnest he was.

"I would be glad," said Little Rifle, with a sigh, "to have you clear up the doubt that covers the past, but I do not believe there is any chance of success."

"You can't tell about that," replied Harry, in a resolute, decided way. "If a continued search cannot find out, we sometimes come upon it by chance. I know you are anxious to learn, and I shall never give over my efforts until I find out."

As he said this he passed the gun back to the owner, and they turned off from the falls where the din and roar prevented them from conversing without great difficulty.

"I wonder whether any of those Indians saw me," continued Harry. "I was out hunting when I found that canoe, and thought I would get in and practice a little, for canoe-paddling is my weak point, and it is the hardest thing in the world for me to get the hang of the thing. Before I knew it I come right smack in front of those lodges, and finding I couldn't paddle upstream, I just lay down and trusted to Providence to take me through all."

"I saw you," laughed Little Rifle, "for I was watching the lodges from the other side the stream, but I didn't dare call to you for fear the Blackfeet would hear me."

"There were Indians in them then?"

"Yes; I saw them, but they didn't come out to the water until you were far down the stream. I could just see your canoe going around the curve above the falls when they looked down the river. I can't say whether they saw you or not, but they acted to me as though they did."

"They have wonderfully sharp eyes, and if you could see me you can make up your mind that they could and did—so we had better be on the lookout."

"And what if they did?" was the reassuring reply of Little Rifle. "Where will they look for you and the canoe now? If they find you both went over the falls, will they hunt any further for you?"

CHAPTER X.

"THE CAVE OF THE WINDS."

NOTWITHSTANDING the reassuring words of Little Rifle, both he and Harry deemed it best to make a cautious survey of the river above the falls before leaving their vicinity. It was possible that a party of Blackfeet might be in their immediate vicinity, in which case they were in imminent danger of being seen and pursued, while if their presence was unsuspected by the red-skins they could continue their jour-

ney homeward with very little fear of any molestation from foes in the rear.

"Remain here while I climb up above the falls," said Little Rifle; "it will take but two or three minutes at most."

"Have a care," admonished Harry, "for these red-skins are mighty sharp, and I think can see around a corner."

The young trapper smiled to think that his new acquaintance should deem him in need of advice in such a business, but he continued as cautiously and carefully upward as if he was sure of finding Blackfeet there.

And so there were, as he very speedily found out. Where in the name of the seven wonders they came from he could not guess, but he saw half a dozen just above the falls upon the other side groping their way down stream, and still more upon the same side with himself coming directly toward him! This latter party were scarcely a hundred feet distant, and in a few minutes would reach the spot where he was. This was a most alarming state of affairs, and Little Rifle had to think and act at once. One glance was sufficient to tell him the whole story, and hastily backing out from his perilous position, he scrambled back to where the wondering Harry was awaiting him.

"They are coming!" he exclaimed in a terrified whisper; "there is a whole party, and they'll be here in a minute. Where shall we hide?"

"Hanged if I know!" replied Harry, fully as startled as his friend, and with less presence of mind. "Let's jump into the water again, and keep diving."

Such a course would not have been recommended by the lad in his cooler moments, and it did not affect Little Rifle in the least. He looked vainly around in quest of some rock that offered a chance to hide, and when he was actually meditating going forward and surrendering himself, in the hope of being ransomed by the authorities at the fort, there flashed upon him, as if by inspiration, a remark that he once heard Old Ruff Robsart make about a cavern behind the falls into which he once made his way.

"It's our only chance!" he exclaimed, dashing toward the water. "Come on, Harry, it is death or life with us!"

Young Northend had no idea what he meant, but he did not hesitate to follow him at full speed, so that he reached the spot scarcely behind him.

Little Rifle dashed down among the rocks, and reaching the edge of the water, at the very edge or side of the falls, he paused, and looked despairingly around. He could see nothing like a cavern, nor anything that seemed to afford an entrance to such a retreat.

"I guess we shall have to give it up," he shouted to Harry, who, unable to catch a syllable in the thunderous din, but understanding the trouble, pointed ahead, and yelled:

"There's a chance to make your way through to something else!"

Neither did Little Rifle hear a word uttered by his comrade; but the motion of his lips, and the gesture of his hand indicated sufficiently well what he meant.

Following the direction indicated, he saw through a thin sheet of water, scarcely thicker than a soap-bubble, and that reflected the prismatic hues, the dark outlines of a rock, that scarcely was as high as his waist, and which was within easy leaping distance.

Not a second was to be lost, and Little Rifle had no sooner detected it than he made a spring, cleaving through the gauzy veil, and striking the flat surface of the rock, which was so slippery that his feet slid forward, and he fell flat upon his back.

Before he could gather himself up, Harry followed, and he too sprawled at full length, neither receiving any injury, and both assuming the perpendicular almost at the same moment.

The fear of Little Rifle was that by plunging through the feathery sheet, and temporarily breaking it, they had dissolved it altogether, and failing to reunite, it would leave not only the rock upon which they stood, but themselves, in full view of the Blackfeet, as soon as they should descend the rocks and place themselves below the falls.

But the screen instantly resumed its normal place, and spread over them like a fan of the thinnest glass, shutting them in, but permitting them to look through upon the outer world. Its transparency, or rather its texture, however, was not like that of a perfect window-pane, but was faulty, abounding with tremulous nebulae here and there that gave a fanciful, grotesque imagery to the objects upon which the eye rested, and that as a consequence, made the picture of themselves equally untrue to nature.

Still, although they had reasonably increased their chances of eluding the Blackfeet, they were in danger, so long as they maintained their present position, and both cast about to discover what their facilities were in the way of a further retreat.

The result was better than they dared to hope. The sheet of water that poured over their heads was fully a hundred feet in width, and the black, slippery rock stretched clean across beneath it, with a width varying from ten to a dozen feet.

The instant Little Rifle discovered this gratifying fact, he began picking his way carefully along, closely followed by Harry.

When they had reached the center, they paused by a common instinct, feeling that they could not increase their chance of safety by going further; and here, as they stood side by side, they looked upon the scene with emotions of wonder, amazement and awe.

Above them, to a great height, the black, dripping rocks extended like the jagged, irregular roof of some cavern, gradually making their way outward, until they formed the ledge over which the entire river swept in its resistless majesty.

It may be said indeed that they stood in a cavern, one side of which was composed of the wet, inky rocks, and the other was the volume of water, converging both in front and back of them, so that the open space resembled a cone in shape.

Looking upward the mighty mass of water

had a deep emerald tinge, like melted glass, and through its translucent depth, the sunlight could only partially penetrate, so that they were enshrouded in a sort of misty twilight. To the left, as they picked their way along the ledge, this volume was white, foamy and impenetrable to the eye, and looking down, the boiling, tumbling, roaring, seething battle of the water was of such an appalling nature as to make the strongest man shiver and draw back with affright, as though he had caught a glimpse of the Plutonian regions.

For a few moments the lads forgot all about their danger from the Indians in the terror inspired by the stupendous scene, and they stood looking up, around and below them with feelings to which no adequate expression can be given. Then they looked in each other's faces, and Harry spoke.

Little Rifle saw his lips move, and placed his ear to them. The boy shouted with all the strength of which he was capable, but, although their heads touched each other, the young trapper could not catch a syllable, and looking again in each other's faces, they laughed and shook their heads, as an acknowledgment that their tongues were of no present use to them.

They were in a world where the language must be one of signs. Little Rifle looked beyond him and pointed to a dark, forbidding opening, which looked as if it were the entrance-way to some vast subterranean chamber; he moved carefully toward it, doubtless recalling something that Old Ruff had told him about his explorations in the same direction, and the truth of which he proposed to test.

Harry, instead of picking his way after him, remained standing where he was, until he saw he had passed the most dangerous point. Then, concluding that it was best to find out whether there was any danger approaching from the Indians, he began retracing his steps to where he and his friend had landed upon their backs.

The moment he reached a point where he could gain a partial view of the outside, he halted, so as not to run too great a risk of being seen by any of their enemies.

It was well that he did so, for at that very instant he descried the dreaded Blackfeet. They were of gigantic size and grotesque shape, as viewed dimly through the glassy sheet that intervened, but they were Indians unmistakably, and three of them were standing upon the very rock from which he and Little Rifle had made their leap but a few minutes before.

"I always believed that when a fellow traveled over the rocks he didn't leave any trail behind him," thought Harry, as he stealthily viewed the red-skins; "but it does seem that you can't hide yourself from these Blackfeet. I shouldn't wonder, now, if they have been tracking the canoe through the water, and have come down below the falls to pick up the trail again."

But second thought convinced the lad that the Indians must be aware of the existence of this "Cave of the Winds," and that they must have discovered some traces of other parties being there. He could see their arms sawing the air, and moving about in a way that showed very clearly that they, too, were using the

language of signs in the presence of the thunderous noise.

"I do believe that they are discussing the question as to who shall take the first leap," thought Harry, as, stretched flat upon his face, he anxiously watched their movements. "And what do they want to come here for, unless it is to gobble us up?"

A very natural conclusion, under the circumstances, and Harry concluded that if such were really the case, it was high time that they should take some precautions to stave off the peril.

He had no gun with him, and it was not in the nature of things that he should consider himself equal to the task of grappling with a sinewy Indian, most probably in the prime of life.

So he looked about to see what had become of Little Rifle.

CHAPTER XI.

THUNDER ALL AROUND.

THERE stood the daring young trapper, directly behind him. He, too, had reached the edge of the rock, and was at bay, holding his rifle, cocked and crasped, ready to discharge the instant it should become necessary.

Both of the lads were saturated with water, for besides their recent plunge into the river, there was a damp moistness in the air, like a copious dew, that would have rendered their garments dripping with water, supposing they had been dry at the time they entered this Cave of the Winds.

His gun could not be otherwise than wet, but the charge was dry, and it could be relied upon to do its duty in case of an emergency; and it was well that it was thus, for the danger was at hand.

Seeing that he was backed up by his young friend, Harry withdrew his gaze from him and resumed his scrutiny of the three Blackfeet, still standing in full view upon the rock.

He had no more than turned his head when one of the Indians took a step forward. There was a pause, and then he burst through the thin, glassy sheet, as he made his plunge, his dark body seen for one instant in mid-air, incased in the transparent setting, and then the crouching body landed almost upon the head of Harry, who hastily drew back to avoid a collision with him.

Moving forward to grapple with the red skin and to endeavor to throw him over the ledge before he could recover, he saw him with amazement roll over as if in great agony, and then, dropping like a log from the slippery rock, he instantly shot down from sight, vanishing in the seething waters below—gone from human sight forever.

All this took place in such a brief space of time that Harry was completely puzzled to understand what it meant. He could divine no reason why the Blackfoot, after effecting a landing, should take it into his head to commit suicide in that fashion. It was impossible that he should have lost his footing so completely that he was unable to prevent the catastrophe, and yet what else could have done it?

In his perplexity he turned about again to see

whether Little Rifle could gesticulate any explanation, and the young trapper did, so effectually that it could not be misunderstood, for, as Harry glanced at him, he was in the act of ramming home another charge in his rifle.

This explained it all. Little Rifle was prepared, and the instant the red-skin broke through the glassy sheet of water, he had fired, giving him an almost instantly fatal wound.

What a vivid realization of the deafening roar of the water, that the gun, although fired directly over his head, and almost within arm's-length, still failed to give him the slightest report.

Little Rifle now showed a keenness of perception and a fertility of resources which in reality was nothing short of the wonderful. As he stood with his rifle held to his shoulder, and his finger pressing the trigger, his view of the Indian bursting through the sheet of water, like the athlete of the hippodrome leaping through the ring of paper, was sharply distinct, although but for a passing moment of time.

The expression on the face of the Blackfoot was that of surprise at seeing the two lads before him. He did not expect to see them—was not looking for them, and the red-skins who remained upon the outside were not aware of their being there.

This, as all will see, was a great point in favor of the lads, if the deception could be continued; but there was the imminent danger that the rest of the Blackfeet, waiting in vain for the return of their comrade, would discover the truth. In such a case, a desperate fight, with the certainty of a fatal result upon the part of the lads, was sure to follow.

Comprehending the nature of the Indian, with its childish credulity and superstition, Little Rifle determined to appeal to this weakness. The Blackfeet believe that the waterfalls of their country are haunted by spirits, and knowing of the existence of the cavern in the rear of this, they could not but look upon the act of their companion as one of daring intrepidity.

The young trapper touched the arm of Harry, and motioned for him to draw back out of the way, while he crept forward until his eyes were at a point where he could see the Indians without showing himself. He waited only long enough to see that fully a half-dozen were clustered upon the rocks, where he suspected they were discussing the action of their companion.

Little Rifle then pushed his gun forward, and pulled the trigger. It was not aimed at the group, for he had no desire to injure any of them, unless compelled to do so in self-defense, but through the gauzy veil every one of them must have caught sight of the sheet of fire, without hearing anything of the report.

This was enough, and they vanished from the spot as suddenly as if the ground had opened and swallowed them, not one being visible a dozen seconds afterward.

This was also a huge step forward on the part of the boys, but there remained still the difficult necessity of getting out of their uncomfortable quarters, and making their way back to the cabin of old Ruff Robsart.

If the Blackfeet had left the rock, it was hardly probable that they had left the neighborhood, and the moment the boys should show themselves, they would be in for it again.

Under these circumstances, it would seem that there was really but one course for them to pursue, which was to remain where they were until night, and then trust to the assistance of darkness for them to get away without being discovered.

Such, we say, was the course dictated by common-sense and prudence, and yet a most unexpected and novel cause now appeared to prevent it. There are few of our readers, perhaps, who are not aware of the rapidly increasing distress caused by an unusual sound in the ear, when it is continued for any length of time. The screaming of a car-whistle, or the near booming of a cannon, after a while becomes unbearable, and will drive mad the person who has not become accustomed to it.

In the excitement of the occasion, and the danger from the Blackfeet, the lads were insensible to any discomfort from the overwhelming roar of the falls; but now, when standing directly beneath them and reflecting that they would probably have to wait for hours, they became aware of a growing uneasiness—a nervous restlessness, rapidly changing to distress, which convinced both that they could not maintain their position and retain their senses at the same time. It would not be long before the time would come when they would be willing to incur any risk to escape the intolerable anguish of this uproar.

Harry was ready to make the leap at once, but Little Rifle had hopes of accomplishing the result by another plan. It will be remembered that he had started to explore what seemed to be a cavern, the opening of which was but a short distance away; but he had withdrawn from the attempt under the conviction that there was more imminent need of him elsewhere.

He was now ready to take up the work again, and motioning for Harry to follow, he moved toward the dark, forbidding depth of what might be an interminable cavern.

To give himself the free use of his arms, he had strapped his rifle to his back, and he now groped cautiously along, like a man feeling his way in a dark room.

Of course the darkness rapidly deepened, until in a few minutes it became impenetrable. The floor of the cavern was slippery, and the utmost care was necessary to prevent a fatal catastrophe. When their eyes became of no further use, both sunk upon their hands and knees, and crept along in this fashion, Harry keeping so close that he could touch the foot of Little Rifle, who used one hand as an elephant uses his trunk in venturing upon a treacherous support.

Two noteworthy facts impressed themselves upon the lads. The floor of the cavern was becoming freer from dampness, and after a time was absolutely dry—a most gratifying change, for they had had so much of water during the last few hours, that it seemed to both that a day or two of scorching thirst would be acceptable, as a means of relief.

Again the floor of the cavern was ascending, very gradually, but none the less positively for all that. Little Rifle suspected that the dryness of the rocks, over which they were crawling, meant that they had passed from beneath the river bed, and were under the solid earth, but with little prospect of ever reaching the surface.

But the most gratifying and welcome fact of all was that they were getting away from the tormenting uproar of the waterfall. With every foot they advanced through the labyrinthine cavern, that terrible continuous crash grew less and less distinct, until it finally sounded like the dull roar of the distant ocean.

The relief was unspeakable, and the ringing din in their ears speedily subsided, so that they began to feel something like their natural selves again. It would be easy enough for them to remain in this part of the cavern until the coming of night, and Little Rifle concluded that this was what they would do.

As they got further away from the tumult, of course they found use for their tongues, and, as may be supposed, they made good use of them, as a sort of recompense for their enforced idleness.

"Suppose the Blackfeet follow us here?" inquired Harry Northend.

"I don't think there is any danger," replied Little Rifle, who then made known—what we have already stated to the reader—his belief that the Indian whom they had shot was not in pursuit of the lads, and indeed did not know or suspect their presence behind the falls. This theory was entirely new to his friend, who, after hearing the reasons for his belief, was disposed to believe it implicitly.

"Then all we have to do," he continued, "is to wait here until night comes, and go out the same way we came in. Isn't that it, Little Rifle?"

"I am afraid it is, unless we can find some other way out. What time of day is it?"

"It must be past noon; I remember just before I went over the falls, that I took my last look, as I supposed, at the sun, and it was then directly overhead, so it must have been about midday."

"Yes," returned Little Rifle, "the afternoon is only fairly begun, for things have moved lively with us since then. If we stay here until night, we have got a good six hours' stretch before us at least. I have waited many a time for a much longer period than that, but it isn't the most pleasant thing to do, especially when you don't know whether you are going to make anything by it or not. I hope we can do better."

"You have hinted that same thing before," said Harry; "what do you mean by it?"

"You know that I told you that Old Ruff Robsart has been here before us. It was a long time ago, and I do not remember what he told me; but I suspect that he found his way out by a different passage from the one he used in entering."

"And you think there is a possibility of our finding the passage?"

"Yes—although there isn't much hope, either, but I would rather be moving about, even if we

don't find anything to pay us, than to stay here and wait till the night comes."

"So would I," added Harry, in his cheery voice. "I got a little crack just now from something against the sore on my head, that stung me a little—but it is all over now. Lead on, and I will follow. If you are going to change your gait, give me notice, so that we don't get separated."

Promising that he would do as requested, Little Rifle continued his progress.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE MESHES OF THE LABYRINTH.

THERE was a pleasurable excitement in thus advancing into the unknown, and the lads experienced something of the emotion of the navigator, who penetrates for the first time into some hitherto undiscovered waste of waters; but it may be noted as a rather curious fact that neither of the lads apprehended the very peril to which they were thus exposing themselves until it was upon them. We refer to the certainty of their going astray in case they continued their explorations too far.

"If we only had a guide or a torch, as the visitors do in the Mammoth Cave, this would be the biggest kind of fun," said Harry, as they continued creeping stealthily along.

Little Rifle wondered what he meant by the Mammoth Cave, but his shy bashfulness prevented his asking any questions. He preferred to remain in ignorance until some more fitting occasion should arise.

"If we carried torches, they would be likely to be guiding points to the Indians," said Little Rifle; "it will be safer to grope along without them, for some of those Blackfeet may be brave enough to try and learn something more about the Spirit of the Waterfall, whose eyes flashed out upon them."

"And who gobbled up one of their warriors," added Harry. "By jingo! why didn't I think of it?"

"Think of what?" asked Little Rifle, not knowing to what he referred.

"Why, that I have a match safe in my pocket, pretty full of matches, too. If they are dry enough to ignite, you haven't any objection, have you?"

"No; go ahead," replied the young trapper, who was desirous of getting a look at the interior. "If there's any danger, they can be put out as soon as they are lit."

From the innermost recess of his pockets, Harry drew out his match-safe, and for a wonder, found that it had done what it was warranted to do, that is, preserved the lucifers from dampness.

One of these was drawn against the dry rock beneath their feet, and, as it grew into a flickering flame, he held it above his head, and the two lads looked about them with no little curiosity.

This temporary twinkling of light seemed to make the gloom more terrible and impressive. In the hasty glance that they cast around, they saw the roof of the cavern composed of enormous masses of rock, black, jagged and awful, while before and around them the terrible

sight stretched away, further than the eye could penetrate.

As soon as the match expired, Harry lit another, and continued this until he had burned a dozen and blistered his thumb and fingers. During this interesting period also, seeing that the ground was unobstructed in front, they advanced fully a hundred yards—only to see, however, no termination to the cavern, whose immensity Harry declared as his belief, exceeded that of the pride and boast of Kentucky. The floor over which they walked, in places was dry as dust, again gravelly, and then again, hard, dry rock. In no direction in which they looked, and they included every point of the compass—could they see any limit to the wonderful freak of nature.

It looked, indeed, as if they were on the outer boundary of those subterranean wonders which are found in different parts of our country, and that are unequalled in any portion of the world.

The sound of the waterfall came to their ears, with a faint murmur that was scarcely audible, and that caused them to forget all about it for the time.

The excitement of exploring the cavern gradually wore away under the monotony of traversing the gloom continually without meeting any obstruction or variety of any character.

"If we had a wheelbarrow load of provisions," said Harry, "we might keep this up for a week or two; but the fact is I am getting tired. How is it with you, Little Rifle?"

"I have had enough of it; how long is it since we left the falls?"

"I should think a couple of hours; we have come a good ways, too."

"We shall need about all our time to get back, so we had better start at once."

"It would be a joke now if we couldn't find our way," laughed Harry, as they wheeled about and started back with a little more assurance than had marked their steps so far.

"Not much of a joke," replied Little Rifle, who was sensible of a thrill of fear, excited by the words of the boy. "I have been lost once or twice in the woods, and if you have ever been in that fix, you know how bad you feel."

"I'll bet I do, for I've been there."

"Think then how much worse it must be to get astray in a place like this, where it is always dark. Did you ever hear of any one being lost in the Mammoth Cave?"

"Yes; they have found their bones there, and nobody dare go very far into it, without a guide and plenty of torches."

"If they get lost when they have torches to guide them, how much less is our chance of finding our way back again, when we haven't anything of the kind?"

The words and the tone in which this was uttered produced its effect upon Harry, but it could not dissipate entirely that flow of spirits which seemed natural to him.

"But they lose their way *there* only when they have penetrated to a much greater distance than we; and then we have a few matches left, and we can direct our steps by the sound of the waterfall. See how much the advantage we have!"

"Hark!"

Both paused in their groping, and listened, but could hear nothing.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, in a whisper. "What was it?"

"I stopped to find out whether we can hear the falls; do you catch the sound?"

"I think I hear their roar—very faint it is true—but distinct for all that!"

"It may be the ringing in our ears, that comes from our having been so stunned by them. And then you know there is always a dull hollow sound that seems to belong to such places."

"By jingo! Little Rifle, you scare a fellow. Are you in earnest?"

"I don't want to scare you any more than I have to, but you are brave enough to face danger when it must be faced, and it's my opinion that neither of us can catch the slightest sound of the waterfall to guide us back again."

"Or in other words, we are lost in the cavern. Is that what you mean?"

"I will hardly say that, just yet, although I think the chances are that way. If you have ever tried to find your way, when there wasn't any moon or stars, you know how hard work it is. I have been dozens of miles away from Uncle Ruff, when night has come, and you know I have traveled the woods and mountains enough to know something about them, and the best thing I was able to do at such times, was to camp out and wait for daylight. Sometimes I have roosted in a tree and sometimes have crawled in among the rocks. If we are going to find our way out of here, I can tell you, Harry, that we have got to keep our wits about us."

"That's just what I want to do," replied his friend, in a lugubrious voice, "but it's mighty hard work for a fellow to keep his head clear, when he hears such talk as that."

Little Rifle laughed at the words of his friend, and he hastened to say:

"We'll never give up till we have to do so. Now, let us see; we have turned square around and suppose we are facing the falls. Let me take your hand, and we will keep our faces this way as well as we can. If we are right, we shall soon hear the sound of the waters, and, if we are wrong it won't be long before we shall find it out. Come on!"

And, hand in hand, they began walking forward in silence, and each endeavoring by the feeling of the floor beneath them to tell whether they were pursuing the right path or not. This was out of the question, and they were not long in discovering it.

Some fifteen or twenty minutes were passed in this way, and the conviction was gradually stealing over Little Rifle that they were lost when the hearts of both were thrilled at the unmistakable roar of waters which burst upon their ears with startling suddenness.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed the joyous Harry, "we are upon the right track. Shall I start and run?"

And in the exuberance of his joy, he let go of the hand of his friend, and was in the act of bounding off like a deer, when Little Rifle caught his arm.

"Don't bid good-by to your common-sense,"

he said, earnestly. "If we are on the right track, we've got plenty of time, without running the risk of breaking our necks!"

Harry took the proffered hand again, with an apology for his rashness, and they progressed slowly and deliberately, but with a much more confident air than heretofore.

"Don't you hear how much louder it grows every minute?" asked the impulsive lad, almost dragging his friend after him. "We have been over this ground before, and what is the need of such tardiness? We were glad enough to get away from the falls, but we will be gladder still to get to them again."

But Little Rifle was not to be moved from his deliberate tread, and he compelled Harry to keep pace with him, though it was hard work to restrain him.

"You will lose nothing by care!" he admonished, "and can gain nothing by haste. Take my advice, and feel every step of ground before you put your foot down."

"Strange we can not see anything of the water," remarked Harry; "there ought to be some dim sort of light to show where we entered, for the sound shows that we are close to them."

He was still walking forward, in his confident way, when Little Rifle seized his arm with such violence as almost to throw him backward to the ground.

"Before you go a step further, strike one of your matches."

"All right," replied the lad; "but what's the use of jerking a fellow's arm off when you want to tell him to do a thing?"

After some delay the match was produced and struck, and it showed them a sight which made their blood run cold with terror!

Less than two paces in front of Harry Northend yawned a black abyss, fully twenty feet in width, through whose fathomless depths roared a torrent of water, with a hollow, reverberating sound, as if it were hundreds of feet below.

Another moment and both would have walked over into eternity.

As the match flickered and fell from the hand of Harry, he grasped and clutched the arm of his comrade, exclaiming, in a horrified whisper:

"What an escape! You saved me again."

"I doubted from the first," he replied, in a calm voice, "because the sound was not natural to me. We are lost, as you can see for yourself; but we will not give up nor keep idle. It is better to push ahead, if we do get wrong."

"Hello! see there!" exclaimed Harry, the next moment. "There is something of a different order."

Both saw at the same instant a small, dim point of light, that looked like the shining of a pale star through mist or vapor.

"What can that be?" he asked, as they paused and gazed toward it.

"I cannot guess even," replied Little Rifle; "let us go toward it and see whether we cannot find out!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HOLE IN THE AIR.

LITTLE RIFLE and Harry Northend stood in the cavern, gazing in wonder at the pale, glim-

mering point of light, neither able to guess what it could mean.

The first supposition that it was a star was dissipated the next instant by the consciousness that such a thing was a physical impossibility, and besides which its appearance was different. It was apparently several inches in diameter, something like a hundred yards distant, and at a point considerably above their heads.

Heeding the terrible warning they had received, the lads advanced with great circumspection. Harry willingly relinquished the place of leader to his companion, knowing how much more careful and skilled he was in business of this kind, and how much more likely he was to detect its nature.

Not until they were directly beneath the strange appearance did they comprehend what it meant. By that time they found that it was fully a foot in diameter, and that it was something like fifty feet above their heads.

"It is a window in the cavern," said Little Rifle, "and we are looking through into the world above us. Let us draw aside to the side of the cavern, where we can rest and look up at the hole without stretching our necks so."

That which had caught their eyes was simply daylight, looking dim, pale and weird as it penetrated the gloom of the cavern.

"Well, that is something," said Harry; "we can take a peep at daylight when we get tired of darkness, and can keep track of the days and nights, if we have to live the life of a hermit for some weeks or months."

Little Rifle, greatly wearied with their uncommon exertions, now stretched out in an easy position, with his head leaning upon his elbow, and looking up at the opening for several minutes, as if to think out some mode of escape to the upper world.

They had lain down in their chosen nook but a short time, when it became evident that the light overhead was slowly growing paler and dimmer. This of course they attributed to the departure of daylight and the coming of night. It continued steadily to fade, until it vanished from view altogether, and then they knew that darkness reigned above and below alike.

Tired and wearied as were the lads, it was not long before they felt a drowsiness stealing over them, against which neither made any struggle. Both lying there felt how great was their dependence upon Heaven to bring them out of their almost hopeless difficulty, and with a prayer for the protection and guidance of their Heavenly Father, both sunk off into a soft, refreshing slumber.

The training and life of Little Rifle made his sleep always light, although it was as refreshing as nature intended, and so it came about that he had remained unconscious but a short time, when he opened his eyes, with the certainty that something from without had occurred to cause him to do so.

Without moving from his position, he raised his head and listened.

Nothing but the dull, hollow roar of the cavern filled his ears, and that was like the very depth of silence itself. Not even the soft rustling of the night-wind among the trees far above his head could be detected.

Applying his ear to the earth he instantly heard a regular *tip, tap, tip, tap*, as if made by the dropping of water, but which a moment's listening satisfied him was produced by another cause.

The uncertain character of the noise made it impossible to tell whether it was near or far, but he judged that it was a long way off.

But, suddenly he started up, and reaching over shook his companion into wakefulness, for he had discovered the meaning of the singular sound, and it was high time that they were on their guard!

"Sh!" whispered Little Rifle; "there's some one in the cavern besides us," he went on, in the same cautious tone. "I can hear two persons walking, and they are coming this way!"

The steps continued their approach, until, as near as the boys could judge, they were directly beneath the opening, and something like fifty feet from the spot where they were crouching upon the ground. Here they paused, and one of them said:

"Give the signal, Tom!"

A whistle followed, that screeched out like that of a locomotive engine, awakening strange echoes through the cavern, and only a few seconds had elapsed when a fainter reply came back from above their heads. The window was closed by the obtrusion of some dark body.

"Hello! Tom, is that you down there?" some one called through the opening.

"Of course. Come, be lively now, and let down that rope."

"All right; there it comes; look out for it!"

The listening lads soon heard sounds as if made by a person in drawing himself up "hand-over-hand" by means of the rope. Such in truth was the case, and a few minutes after they saw two bodies disappear, one by one, through the skylight.

What they had heard of course told them that the three men whose voices they had heard were not Indians but white men. What their errand was in the cavern, it was hard to conjecture, as was also the question whether it would be prudent to advance and make their situation known to them.

They could catch the muttered mumbling of words far above, but could not understand a syllable uttered. In a few moments the sound of voices ceased altogether, for the men had evidently gone away.

While Little Rifle stood all attention, Harry was groping around with his hands.

"By jingo! they have left the rope hanging!" he exclaimed, in a delighted whisper, as he pushed it toward his friend. "I wonder if they didn't do that on purpose for us?"

The young trapper grasped it in his hands, and found that it was an ordinary hemp rope reaching to the floor of the cavern, and capable of bearing a heavy strain.

"Ha! ha!" softly laughed little Rifle, "here is our deliverer," and without a word of explanation the resolute lad sprang to the ascent, and, hand-over hand like a sailor, went up the rope with great agility.

Harry, with an anxiety that may be well imagined, stood peering upward in the gloom,

awaiting the result of this perilous venture on the part of his friend.

He held the rope grasped in both of his hands, noting, by its swaying and trembling, the progress made by the daring young trapper.

By and by the swaying of the rope ceased, by which he knew that Little Rifle was at the top.

Then Harry himself began the ascent, and had reached about half-way to the top, when Little Rifle called out, evidently in a subdued voice:

"Hello, Harry! are you down there?"

"No, I ain't; I'm half-way up," he answered, in an imprudently loud tone.

"Come on as fast as you can; the way is clear, but there's no telling how long it will remain so."

Spurred on by this, Harry hastened on, and was soon up to the hole. Taking him by the hand, Little Rifle dragged him from beneath the clump of bushes which served as a screen to the entrance to the cavern, and then, catching him by the arm, he compelled Harry to follow him away from the vicinity.

The moon was high in the sky, and the night was clear and balmy, inspiring a delicious happiness through the hearts of the boys, as they realized that they were treading the earth again, and all present danger was past.

They could hear the murmur of the river, flowing near them, and making their way toward it, found, as they had suspected, that the cavern extended a long ways under ground, and had led them a goodly distance away.

Fortunately they were upon the right side, and it only remained for them to get over the intervening distance between them and the cabin where old Robsart made his head-quarters.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING SHOT.

WITH light hearts and buoyant spirits the lads made their way forward. Little Rifle, understanding precisely their situation, led the way without doubt or hesitation, and in the course of an hour began ascending the ridge, from which he had just made his survey of the Indian lodges and the river.

By the time they had reached the top of the ridge, the lads were thoroughly worn out, and concluded to encamp and wait for daylight.

After considerable search, Little Rifle discovered a suitable hiding-place among the rocks, into which they crawled, and almost instantly dropped into a deep slumber, and when the glad sun came up over the mountains, Harry opened his eyes. As he turned his head to greet his companion, no Little Rifle was to be seen! The displaced boulders showed that he had gone out. But whither?

Crawling cautiously out from his lodgings Harry discovered a small, bubbling spring of cool, fresh water, from which he took a refreshing draught, concluding that he had taken occasion to reconnoiter, and would shortly put in an appearance.

"I hope he has gone off to scare up a breakfast," he mused, as he sat down by the spring, "for I'm hungry enough to eat a raw blackfoot—Hello!"

He heard the crackling of undergrowth, and there, scarcely twenty feet distant, he saw one of the finest and plumpiest of antelopes, coming toward the spring, evidently for the purpose of obtaining his "morning bitters."

"Oh, dear," gasped the boy, as he fixed his eyes upon him, "if I only had my gun! I wonder if I can't get near enough to knife him?"

The instant he moved, the delicate, graceful animal halted, threw back its head and fixing it steadily upon him for a single second, wheeled about and

"I never had a meal travel so fast! What's up now? He must have hit him something!"

His exclamation was caused by the sudden tumbling of the animal, who, rolling all over in a heap, struggled up again, fell, and then lay still.

The crack of a rifle, that now reached the ears of the boy, explained all; and the animal had scarcely ceased his struggles when Little Rifle emerged from the bushes.

"Bully for you!" shouted Harry, dashing forward the instant he saw him. "Don't throw away his hoofs and horns, for I'm hungry enough to eat them too."

"While I'm getting some slices ready, do you kindle a fire, Harry, and I'll soon give you one of the best meals of your life."

"Don't be too long about it," said the boy, as he flew about to obey the request. "I think I can hold out about half an hour longer, and then I'll be ready to begin on you."

It required but a few minutes to gather a quantity of wood; but the hungry lad was in such impatient haste that he lost a great deal of time in starting a fire after it was ready. He succeeded at last, by which time Little Rifle had two large, tender slices from the choicest part of the animal, dressed and ready for the coals.

Only a few minutes were required to prepare both, and then the lads made a meal, whose luscious richness can be understood only by those that have been feasted in similar circumstances. As they crunched through the tender, juicy steaks, they could only roll their eyes at each other, without attempting to give expression to their enjoyment. Occasionally Harry indulged in a groan or sigh of happiness—but that was all.

Little Rifle had gauged the capacities of both, with no inconsiderable skill, and when his friend had made away with the last morsel, despite his loud objections at the beginning of the meal, he was obliged to confess himself fully satisfied.

"I thought I could hold more than that," he said, looking wistfully at the remains of the animal, "but alas! for human ambition. Another mouthful and I would explode."

As there was no cause for remaining longer where they were, they made ready to move on again toward old Robsart's head-quarters, where Harry expected to obtain a rifle and start upon his return to the fort.

"Do you notice that clump of bushes over there?" asked Little Rifle, touching his arm and pointing to some scrubby shrubbery but a short distance away.

"Yes; what of it? Is there another antelope there?"

"There is something, for I have noticed a movement once or twice while we were eating. Look out! there is an Indian and he is going to fire."

And, grasping the shoulder of the lad, he sprung to one side, dragging him with him. At the same instant there was a flash and a sharp report as the bullet whizzed toward them.

Little Rifle, experienced in the dangers of a hunter's life, was not caught with an unloaded gun. The thin puff of smoke had hardly begun to curl up from the clump of bushes when his rifle was at his shoulder, and he sent the return bullet crashing among the leaves and twigs. At the same moment both sprung to cover.

"You haven't any gun," said Little Rifle to his friend, "so keep your head out of sight, and if I haven't peppered that red-skin I'll do so next time."

"May be there are several of them," ventured his friend.

"No," replied the young trapper, "if there were

they'd have fired when they had the chance. Keep your head down, Harry.

"I hear him groaning and moaning."

"You must hear it, too."

"wounded the 1"

The Blackfoot isn't hurt at all, and he is

those noises on purpose to draw us out. I

ch you, Harry, to keep q

now Little Rifle did the very thing against which he had so earnestly cautioned his friend. Looking steadily over the face of the rock for a moment, a strange expression lit up his face, and he slowly rose to his feet, until his whole body above his knees was in full view of their hidden foe.

"Well, I declare if it doesn't beat everything!" exclaimed Little Rifle, more to himself than any one else, "I thought it was an Indian all the time."

As Harry rose to his feet he saw the explanation of this soliloquy. From behind the all-important clump of bushes came a large, bushy-whiskered white man, clad in hunter's costume, and apparently in the best of humor.

The hunter, shaking all over with laughter, extended his broad palm as he came up and closed it around the small hand of Little Rifle, who, after exchanging a word or two with him, turned and introduced him to Harry as his Uncle Robsart.

"Glad to see you, younker," exclaimed the hairy old hunter, as he gave Harry a hearty shake of the hand. "Scared you a little, I s'pose. I see'd you chawin' antelope, and I thought I'd wake you up a little."

Little Rifle acquainted the trapper with the principal facts of their meeting and the subsequent adventures. He listened with great interest, especially to their adventure in and escape from the cavern.

"That's the place I went into, a couple of years ago," Old Ruff said, "and come mighty nigh getting lost the same as you. But I didn't see nothin' of that hole in the top, nor didn't discover any signs of them other chaps being in thar. You didn't get a fair look at them?"

"No; luckily they didn't get a fair look at us. They cleared out before we came out to look around, and we didn't stay to make their acquaintance."

"What do you s'pose they was doing underground?" asked Old Ruff, in a significant tone.

The lads replied that they had not the remotest idea.

"Thar's go'd in that cavern, boys, and that's what them chaps war in thar for. I don't s'pose they own any more of Oregon than we do, and some time I'll go into that big cellar and take a look around ag'in. Mebbe I might git my claws onto some of the yaller stuff. Afore you go back to the fort, Harry, we'll take a look 'round, and see what chance thar is for a spec; but if it happens that we don't get the time to do it, why you can come down ag'in from the fort and we'll fix it then, sure. If there's gold thar you shall have your chance in, lad."

Harry now became aware of something which he could not understand, and which caused him no little uneasiness. He found that Old Ruff was covertly watching him, as though he held some kind of a suspicion regarding his presence so far away from the fort. Once or twice, when he hastily raised his eyes, he saw the keen orbs of the trapper fixed upon him with a sharp, penetrating glance.

More than once Harry was tempted to ask the meaning of this; but he noted that Old Ruff took particular pains to conceal his surveillance, and this made him fearful of offending him.

There was a change, too—though comparatively slight—in the deportment of Little Rifle. Now that they were reinforced by the shaggy old trapper, he appeared desirous of withdrawing into the background, and forcing the hunter to take his place in the familiar confidence with Harry.

In the latter addressed or approached him he manifested a singular coyness—his face flushed with embarrassment, while he frequently permitted his

gaze to drop to the ground, or turned his head away altogether.

Outwardly old Robsart was all friendship, and was in his best mood. He recounted many of his adventures in catching and taming bears, for which, as is well known, he had a great passion.

Before resuming their journey homeward, Old Ruff resolved upon an observation from the top of the ridge.

Accordingly all three made their way to the crest. Harry produced his telescope, and a very careful reconnaissance followed.

CHAPTER XV.

A TOUGH STORY.

SEVERAL miles distant, in the heart of a dense pine forest, was the camp-fire of a party of Indians. Old Ruff, taking the glass, saw by its aid the smoke making its way through the tree-tops; but he bestowed hardly a glance upon it, for he was in search of more important parties.

Turning the instrument toward the banks of the river, it was not many minutes before he descried two men making their way among the rocks and undergrowth in the direction of the point indicated as the one from which the lads had made their exit.

The clumps of bushes, huge rocks, and here and there a few trees, intervened so frequently, and the men were picking their way with so much caution, that it was only now and then Old Ruff was able to get a fair look at them; but he succeeded in discovering that both were white men, dressed somewhat like Indians, and he was able also to keep himself informed of the general direction taken by them. When still several hundred yards from the river they halted. Old Ruff could see it was near some shrubbery, which concealed their movements and hid them from his view.

He held the glass pointed fully ten minutes toward them, but still they remained invisible.

"That's the spot!" he exclaimed to himself, as he lowered the instrument and looked at it sharply with the unaided eye until he felt he had fixed it in his memory. "There's the door to one of the cellars where Oregon has stored something rich, and into which Old Ruff Robsart means to take a peep one of these days."

Nothing remained now to be done but to resume their journey toward their own lodge, and the three descended the ridge, Old Robsart taking the lead and the boys following silently. A half-hour later they reached the stream, beside which Little Rifle was walking when we introduced him to our readers in the first chapter. Here a canoe was drawn from its concealment, and the three entered and were paddled across by Old Ruff, who was in an especially good-natured and humorous mood.

When they once more placed their feet upon terra firma he took great care to conceal the boat so that it would not be likely to attract the eye of any one unless he stumbled directly upon it.

"I used to cut my name on my boats," he said in explanation, "so that the varmints could know what chap they belonged to, and consequently what trouble he'd get into if he ran away with 'em; but you see the varmints ain't well up in their eddyca-tion, and I s'pose they sometimes thought it was thar names instead of mine. Leastways they run off with so many of 'em that it bu'sted me for a time, and arter that I've made it a practice to hide 'em."

"Hide whom?" asked Harry, with a laugh—"the canoes or the Indians?"

"Both, whenever I got the chance; but thar's one question I could never settle in my mind, and you seem to be rather a cute chap, mebbe you kin settle it for me."

"I'll do the best I can," replied the lad; "let me hear what it is."

"A couple of years ago thar was a Government expedition sent out here, and they engaged me as

scout and hunter for 'em. They had a couple of india-rubber boats with 'em that had a powerful stretchiness in 'em. They used to roll 'em up when they was in camp and play football with 'em, and then stretch 'em out for tents at night. So you see they war mighty handy any way you fixed it."

"I've heard of them," said Harry, "and I think if I had had one of them when I went over the falls, I might have bounded out again. I'm sure I'm bound to try it if I ever get the chance."

"Wal, they tied 'em up one night on the shore of a purty good-sized stream, intending to cross over at daylight; but while all war asleep, a Nez Perce Injin stole up and crawled into one. I s'pose he meant to steal what he could lay his hands on, and the first thing he grabbed was a whisky-bottle. One snuff of that settled his hash, and he never stopped guzzling till he had swallowed the last drop, by which time he was so drunk he couldn't set up, so he tumbled over into the bottom of the boat and went to sleep. I happened to be on watch on the other side the camp, and the feller that was guardin' here didn't hear nothin' of what was goin' on."

"Something or other was the matter with the boat. I s'pose like as not it wasn't fastened as it orter been, fur the current worked it loose, and about a couple of hours afore daylight it went off down-stream."

"Of course in the mornin' we found out what had happened, and I see'd, too, how it had come to git loose, and a couple of us started on a hunt arter it. We found it about three miles down the river, where it had cotedched fast ag'in' the limb of a tree, and we got in and tried to paddle it back. The Nez Perce was still sound asleep, and we took him along."

"But that was the greatest job I ever undertook," added Old Ruff, with a sigh. "At the first out I set down in the bow; and begun to paddle. I thought I was gittin' along powerful well, but when I turned my head I found the stern hadn't budged a bit. I had jist staid whar it was when we started, and the blamed thing was jist stretching out—stretching out."

"And you want me to tell why it did so?" said Harry; "the rear of the boat must have remained fast in the limbs of the tree."

"I knowed that as well as you do, but that ain't the question at all. I'll come to that bimeby. I unfastened the cotch, and then squatted in the stern and paddled harder than ever. I worked so hard, that I kept the rear part goin' faster than the forward, so that now and then I hit my nose ag'in' the prow. That made it bulge into the quarest kind of shapes, and it bounced about so much that I didn't git along very fast. But at last, I reached camp, whar thar was a good deal of fun when they found we had brought the Injin back with us. Some wanted to skulp him on the spot, but Colonel Stebbins said no. He hadn't committed murder, but he had been cotedched at burglary, and we should try 'im on that charge."

"So they got up what they called a court-martial, the colonel himself acting as boss—"

"Judge Advocate, he is called," interrupted Harry, who was becoming quite interested in the narra-tion.

"That's it, and they had their lawyers, or whatever you've a mind to name 'em, and the Injin was cotedched up. By that time he had worked off most of the whisky. He wasn't sober, not by no means, but he was jist drunk enough to be independent and sassy, and he was the smartest red-skin I ever sot eyes on. He could talk English as well as we, and he understood what they war drivin' at from the fust."

"When they axed him to pick out a lawyer, he shook his head, and said he could lie as fast as any lawyer. That made 'em all laugh, and I could see that they didn't mean to hurt the varmint. If he'd been a Blackfoot it would have gone hard with him, for they had bothered us a good deal, but the Nez

Percees had never troubled us afore, and they're a much better set of people anyway.

"I never could understand what made that red-skin so smart," said Old Ruff, with a wondering shake of the head, "it beat my ca'c'lations all holler."

"I don't see anything particularly smart in what he did," said Harry; "unless it may have been that he got hold of a bottle of whisky before you did. I suppose it takes a smart man to do that."

Old Robsart looked down upon the impudent lad, with one of his most patronizing glances. He felt that he was a sharp one, and he liked him all the better for it.

"It's a pity we hadn't you there," he said; "if we had, things would have gone different, but nobody was around as cute as you."

"Let us hear how the trial resulted, and I beg pardon for my ill-manners."

"Wal, Colonel Stebbins was a big, fat, jolly chap, and he see'd the fun ahead. So he had the red-skin fotched up afore him, and he read a paper full of big-sounding words, that I don't b'l'ieve he understood himself; but when he got through he told the varmint that he was accused of running away with a boat that belonged to the United States, and he axed him what he had got to say in his defense."

"The red-skin gave a hiccup or two, and then said he didn't run away with the boat at all. That he got into it to take a nap, and when he woke up, he found it had run away with him, and he thought the Great Father of the red-men in Washington orter send him some presents for the outrage he had suffered."

"Wal, when he said that, thar was a screech through the camp that almost lifted the ha'r off my head, and Colonel Stebbins shook so hard, that the top of the barrel he was sittin' on broke through, and droppin' a couple of feet down into it, he got wedged so fast he couldn't get out. While two or three of his officers was tryin' to pull him and the barrel apart, the Injun gave the hoops a whack with his tomahawk, that made the staves fly apart, and let him out ag'in."

"When things had got sobered down a little, the colonel put him on his trial for stealing a bottle of whisky, and I'll be shot ef he didn't deny it right square, and then ax the officer to prove it on him. Who see'd him do it? Whar was the man? He axed him to be fotched. That was another stunner, and all Colonel Stebbins could do, when he got over laughin', was to ax the red-skin whar he got the liquor that made him drunk, and that all could smell on him that minute. With another hiccup, he said that wasn't nobody's business, an' he'd see 'em all hanged fust, and then he turned round and axed the colonel whar he got the whisky that he got drunk on."

"That turned the laugh on him, and fur fifteen minutes the other officers rolled over on the ground, and the colonel had to hold his sides to keep from bu'stin'. When he got things kinder quieted down, he told the red skin that the charges wa'n't sustained and he might go; but afore he left camp, the officers gave him a half-dozen blankets, a new rifle, ammunition, beads, trinkets till he could hardly carry 'em all. You see he had got the best of 'em all so well, that they liked him, and war willing to do anything in the world for him."

"And was that the last you heard of him?" asked Little Rifle.

"Not by a long shot; that night the confounded scamp stole into camp, run off two of the best horses we had, and come powerful near scalping Colonel Stebbins himself."

"What was it that prevented?"

"The colonel wore a wig, and when Nez Perce grabbed his hair, you see it come off without using his knife. So he stuck a couple of eagle-feathers in the top, and set on the head of one of the mules, and then skedaddled. I've always 'spicioned that Injin had white blood in him."

"His stealing the whisky bottle looks very much like it. Was *that* the question you wished to settle?" asked Harry.

"No; I came near forgettin' it. What I wanted to ask was, whether in law that varmint run away with the boat, or whether it run away with him. I've often thought of it since, but was never able to make out which way it would be. How do you think it would be decided down in Frisco?"

Harry Northend was not a little amused at the intense seriousness of Old Ruff, as he referred the question to him. It was not to be supposed, however, that his head was very clear upon such knotty points, and he frankly admitted his inability to decide.

"I'll put the question to some of them chaps down in Frisco the first time I'm there, and stop bothering my head over the blamed thing."

"Be sure and put the question to two separate ones," said Harry, "first giving them each ten dollars."

"What fur?"

"Because one will decide the Indian guilty, and the other will decide him innocent. Thus you will get satisfaction from one of them at least, no matter how you look at it yourself. You will pay your money, and take your choice."

"Here we are at home!" exclaimed Little Rifle.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE lodge of old Robsart and Little Rifle has been already sufficiently described in these pages, without requiring any further reference from us. It was near mid-day when it was reached, and the three decided to spend several hours where they were, as there was no necessity of setting their traps until nightfall.

Little Rifle passed to his apartment in the rear of the lodge, and Harry felt a little hurt that he was not invited to accompany him. However, he carefully concealed his feelings, and sitting down in a lazy attitude, proceeded to examine the rifle which had been presented to him.

He found it to be an excellent one, well made and finely ornamented. It had doubtless been given to the Blackfoot by some kind-hearted Peace Commissioner, who most likely formed the first target upon which the red-skin had tried his skill. As he was also furnished with an abundance of ammunition, Harry was ready to start on his return to the fort.

The reserve of Little Rifle and the suspicions of the old trapper almost decided him to go at once, with a mere formal good-by. While he was examining his weapon, he could feel that the eyes of the old trapper were upon him, and it nettled him not a little to think that any white man should entertain any distrust regarding him.

Unable to conjecture the cause, he concluded that the best thing he could do was to relieve them of his presence.

All at once he sprung to his feet, and slung the rifle over his shoulder.

"I guess I'll go now," he said, in his off-hand manner; "they will begin to wonder at my absence from the fort. I can reach there by night, if I make good use of my time."

Old Ruff, who was carefully arranging some sticks so as to prepare a fire, looked up at him, without the least appearance of surprise. Indeed, Harry fancied that there was something in his looks which said plainly enough that he was pleased to hear his words.

"It's gettin' purty well on into the day, younker, and you'd better wait till mornin' afore you start on such a tramp."

Regarding this invitation as insincere, Harry paid no heed to it, and had actually taken several steps on his way, when Little Rifle unexpectedly put in an appearance.

"If you must go, Harry," said he, as he stepped forth into the open air, "I'll go with you until you're within sight of the fort. It is a good ways from here, and you know what danger there is to pass through. I should never forgive myself if anything should happen to you."

Harry was touched at this generous offer, and he felt all his resentment vanish on the instant, to be succeeded by his tender, loving affection for the lad who had already so generously risked his life for him.

He looked toward old Robsart, who he expected would object to any such proceeding, but he seemed to be as willing to this arrangement as to anything else. Indeed he showed that he looked upon it with favor, for he said:

"Take the straightest course you can follow, younkers, for you will need all your time. But see here, Little Rifle, I want to say a word or two to you afore you go."

There could be no legitimate objection to this, but it disturbed Harry, as he saw the two walk away, side by side, for a rod or two, and then, standing with their backs to him, engage in a cautious but earnest conversation.

He did not hear a word, but, as he looked that way, he could see both gesticulating, the old trapper being much more excited than the younger, who from appearances was mildly expostulating against some of his utterances.

"It is none of my concern," muttered Harry, "what secrets they may have between themselves. I never saw either until yesterday, and may never see them again, but they have had no cause to show any suspicion toward me. I do feel drawn toward Little Rifle by an irresistible emotion. There is so much true nobility in his nature, he is so wonderfully handsome, and he has such rare mental powers that it is a sin to keep him away here in these solitudes, away from all creation. I'll have a good talk with him on the way to the fort, and if he has got any ambition in his nature I'll rouse it, and make him go back East with me. I will get father to adopt and educate him, and we'll make a man of him in a few years—Hello! here he comes, walking as if he was in a great hurry."

Old Ruff came forward too, and taking the hand of the boy, said:

"I expect to be over to the fort in a few days, arter hosses to take my peltries away, so I won't say good-by to you, only I wish you good luck, and keep your eye open for varmints."

Harry returned the salutation, in his pleasant manner, and then, as both he and Little Rifle waved the old man farewell, they turned their faces westward and started on their memorable journey to Fort Abercrombie, neither party, in his wildest dreamings, suspecting what a passing strange adventure should befall them ere they were to catch sight of the Stars and Stripes, that waved from the flagstaff of this frontier post.

When they had reached a point about a mile distant, a very perceptible change in the sky became apparent. The sun was hid by clouds that swiftly drifted up from the Cascade Range, and the air which had been mild and balmy, rapidly grew colder, until the lads were compelled to walk quite briskly to keep up the circulation and warmth of the body. The wind blew strongly, whistling and moaning among the trees like the blasts of winter, and there was every indication of a great elemental disturbance.

"There is a storm coming, as sure as fate," said Harry, looking up at the threatening sky.

"And I shouldn't wonder if it were a snow storm," added Little Rifle. "I have seen them come up as suddenly as this before. Hadn't we better go back, and stay in our lodge over night?"

"I would rather go on," replied Harry, who dreaded the annoyance of being covertly watched by the old trapper, for an indefinite number of hours. "If the storm becomes too severe, why we

can go into camp and wait until it blows over. Do you think it will amount to much?"

Little Rifle looked up to the sky, with the air and manner of a weather prophet, and replied:

"No; I think it is a sudden flurry, or a squall that will be over in an hour; but you notice how chilly it is; we ought to be provided with blankets, at any rate."

"I can stand it if you can."

"I only spoke on your account," said Little Rifle as they started forward. "We can walk fast, and that will keep us warm, and if it gets too cold for us to stand it, we will crawl in among the rocks somewhere and build a rousing fire."

Harry found the walk brisk enough to suit the most enthusiastic pedestrian, and it speedily sent a glow of warmth all through his system.

A moment after several feathery flakes of snow drifted against their faces, and then scarcely five minutes had elapsed when the air was full. Millions and billions of the white flakes, some of them of large size, were eddying and whirling all about them. When they looked up they could barely keep their eyes open, and they were literally blinded by them.

"Jingo! this is rather sudden," shouted Harry with a laugh. "I guess the Coast Range has blowed up, and sent the pieces this way."

The snow drove against them and filled the air so entirely that the boys could not see a rod ahead of them. Little Rifle, however, was able to recall where they were, and he groped forward, until they reached the shelter of some rocks, where they could remain until the snow-squall should terminate.

As they stood there, looking out upon the beautiful snow, Little Rifle reached out and took the gun of Harry for the purpose of making a more minute examination of it than he had yet done.

"While you're doing that I'll take a look at that handsome little piece of yours. Hello!"

As Harry took it in his hand, he grasped the stock in a peculiar manner—very differently from what he would have done at any other time, and, as he did so, he pressed something or other that caused a little lid beneath the trigger-guard to fly open.

And while Little Rifle was staring wonderingly at this hitherto unknown contrivance, Harry reached one thumb and finger in, and drew out a small twist of paper. On it he saw written a few words in faded ink.

And these words told the secret of Little Rifle's birth, history and life.

CHAPTER XVII.

WOOLING IN THE WILDERNESS.

LITTLE RIFLE stood pale and breathless as he saw Harry Northend draw the slip of paper from the secret recess in the stock of his gun.

"Shall I read it?" asked Harry in a husky voice.

"Yes," was the whispered answer.

And he read:

"On the completion of her second birthday, I presented this rifle to my beloved daughter Hagar. Providence has ordained that a portion of her life shall be spent in the wilderness, and it may be of some use to her in the future. Her mother died at her birth, and she is my only child. I am compelled to go on a long journey that may separate her from me for years, and I leave her in charge of Maquesa, the Indian chief who is my friend tried and true.

"JARED RAVENNA."

When Harry had completed the reading of this extraordinary slip, he folded it up and carefully replaced it in the small opening and closed the cunningly-contrived lid, and then looked at his companion, who, still pale, and now shivering in every limb, said:

"Harry, you have discovered my secret; Hagar Ravenna is my name."

"And you are not a boy, but a girl, and the most beautiful one that I ever laid eyes upon. I did not

suspect that, and I now understand your bashfulness and the suspicion with which Old Ruff looked upon me."

"Yes; he had great fears that you suspected my sex, and when we were on the point of starting, did his best to dissuade me against going with you."

"Do you regret that you came?"

"No; else I might have lived and died in ignorance of my real name."

"And now that you have heard it pronounced, is there anything in it that sounds familiar—that brings up past memories? *Hagar!* think of it."

Little Rifle looked off in the blinding snow with a dim, vacant, wandering look, as if she were seeking to awaken long-forgotten memories. She stood thus, silent and abstracted, for several minutes, and then spoke in a low, hushed voice:

"Yes, there is something in the sound of the word that struck my ear as though I had heard it before, and it calls up again the picture that I sometimes see in my dreams, of a great ship sailing over the water; but the picture is dim and shadowy, and I do not know whether it is only the outlines of a dream that came to me sometime away back in childhood, perhaps when I lay asleep in the lodge of the Indian chief, Maquesa."

"It is a reality—I know it," said the excited Harry: "you have a father living somewhere in the world and there is a future opening before you."

"But how is he to be found?" asked Little Rifle.

"He may be thousands of miles away; or it may be that he came back years ago, and finding nothing of me has given me up as dead."

"That may all be, and it may not. But do you wish to live the life of a savage in the woods? Don't you ever want to go among civilized beings and become one of them?"

"I have often dreamed and often wished," she answered, lowering her eyes and looking at the snowflakes which were drifting against her moccasins.

"And your dream shall become a reality. Go with me to the fort and wait till father comes, and you shall go back with us; you shall be educated, and then what woman shall equal you?"

"And supposing my father is never found—how shall I ever repay your father and you?"

The fine dark eyes of Harry Northend glowed with a radiant light as he leaned forward, and placing his arm around the neck of Little Rifle, imprinted a warm kiss upon her cheek, and said, in low, ardent tones:

"By becoming my wife, and thus I shall be repaid a thousand times over. I understand now how it was that, when I looked up in your face, as I began to recover my senses, after you had dragged me from the water below the falls, a feeling shot through me like the shock of electricity. It puzzled me to understand what it meant; I thought yours was the handsomest face I ever looked upon, and it often seemed to me that there was a feminine delicacy and refinement about you, in spite of the uncivilized life you were leading. I found, too, that your manner and conversation proved that you had received a partial education. But above all, your heroic character, as you showed it when you leaped into the water, drew me toward you as the pole draws the magnet."

"I was puzzled, and not a little hurt," continued the impassioned Harry, as he still kept one arm around the neck of Little Rifle, and held her hand imprisoned in his own, "at your shyness, especially after Old Ruff appeared upon the scene. It seemed to me that I was distrusted by both of you, but now I can understand that it was only your instinctive maidenly modesty, and I honor you for it."

The cheeks of the beautiful girl (as Little Rifle must henceforth be regarded) grew rosier and redder, and now flushed to scarlet, as she never once raised her eyes from the ground, and Harry poured out his burning, impassioned words.

"But with the discovery of the secret comes the

discovery that I love you with my whole heart and soul. I feel that my future is to be linked with yours; if I could know this minute that we were to be separated, I would want to die. Let me pledge my love to you and receive yours—or the promise of it at some future time, and then we will turn to the great future that opens before us. We are both young yet. Everybody persists in calling me a boy, and I suppose I am, but it can't last much longer. If my life is spared, no one can hinder me from becoming a man, and you are younger yet than I, and we shall only think of marriage as something that is to come after awhile. Some time, when everything is ready, I shall wed you—you shall be my bride of the wilderness. What do you say, Little Rifle? Are you prepared to give me any encouragement?"

It would seem all natural and proper that this wooing and winning should have reached its successful conclusion at once—that the beautiful forest girl should have acknowledged her love at once, and confessed that her future would be hopeless unless it echoed back the prayer of her ardent lover. But she was truthful, and possessed rare good sense. Loving Old Robsart had given her the clothes of a hunter to wear, as soon as she was able to go about, and had carefully concealed the knowledge of her sex from those with whom they happened to come in contact.

This was undoubtedly wise, as it saved her from annoying attentions and perhaps insult at the hands of the rough borderers, who occasionally saw her; but the old mountaineer had given her, after his own peculiar fashion, considerable knowledge of "society" and its usages.

And then her own instinctive maidenly sense told her that she had no means of knowing she really returned the love of the noble young fellow at her side. Gratitude and friendship she knew entered into her emotions, but she could not feel positive that there was anything more.

She spoke, therefore, as her conscience dictated:

"I do not know that I understand what love is—that is, as you look upon it." She spoke in a low, soft, but unhesitating manner, with her eyes still upon the ground. "I know that I think a great deal of you—that I would risk my life at any time to keep you from harm. I am so fond of you, indeed, that I cannot deceive you by saying that I love you, when I am not sure about it."

This was disappointing to Harry, but, as a moment's reflection revealed to him the admirable spirit which prompted it, he could but respect and love her all the more.

"I was wrong in pressing you to answer such a question before you had time to think over it. Let it go for the present, and I will wait until you are fully ready. But I cannot deny myself asking one thing more."

He paused a moment as if waiting for permission, and she raised her wonderfully handsome eyes and looked in his face.

"What I want to ask, Little Rifle, is whether you are willing to give me a promise?"

"Ask me whatever you wish."

"If you say you are unable to know, in your own heart, what the nature of love is, of course there is no one who has a place before me in your affections?"

The face of the girl expanded into a smile, as she answered:

"Of course not, how could there be?"

"I didn't know but what the old man was jealous of me."

And now the smile broke forth into musical, heartfelt laughter.

"Does love put such funny dreams as that into your head? How could such a thing as that be? I am a child and he is a man well on in years. He often looks at me, and says something about my growing so fast, and says, too, that it only seems a year ago that he found me in the lodge of the

Indian chief, and he declares that he shall always look upon me as that same little child. He loves me, indeed, as your father loves you."

"I've no objection to that," replied Harry, with a prodigious sigh of relief, "so it don't grow on him too fast. But what I want to ask, Little Rifle, is whether you are willing to give me a promise?"

"Yes; I will promise anything I can," she answered.

"If ever, in the future, you are ready to love any one, will you remember me?"

"I am sure I can make that pledge," she answered, with a glowing smile. "In the whole broad world there can never be any one who can take a place before you in my affections."

"That is all I can ask," exclaimed the delighted Harry, kissing her warm cheek again and again. "I look upon you now as promised to me; that sweet thought shall ever be with me—it shall cheer me onward, and after my probation is ended, after you have learned more of the world than you now know, you shall see how great was my love for you. Bless you, my dearest Bride of the Wilderness!"

They had spent a much longer time than they supposed, in the natural excitement and agitation resulting from the discovery, and they had proceeded but a short distance on their journey when both saw that it would be impossible for them to reach the fort until late at night; so they pressed forward now, as if to make up for the sweet moments lost.

Pressing on, night overtook them, and yet the fort was far away; so nothing remained but to choose a cosy spot and to go into camp for the night. This course Little Rifle advised as the gathering dusk rendered all the wood-paths obscure, and she began at once to look out for a safe retreat, not among the rocks and woods around, but down in a ravine, into which the girl-guide, to Harry's surprise, now worked her way.

"Here we shall find wood and everything in readiness," she said in explanation; "for Uncle Ruff and I have made our camp here two or three times, during the past few months."

As they went down deeper and deeper into the gorge, the darkness became so intense that Harry was only enabled to follow his guide by the sound of her moccasins.

"Here we are," she finally said, in a low voice; "stand quiet a moment."

He could hear her moving about, for several minutes, when she spoke:

"All is ready; strike a match, and we shall have a fire right away."

As Harry drew out his match-safe he found that only two lucifers were in it.

"By jingo! suppose both of them go out!" he exclaimed, in a terrified whisper; "here goes!"

As he spoke, he drew the phosphorus swiftly along his sleeve, when it broke into a blaze.

"Where are you, Little Rifle?" he asked, looking anxiously around, and then, seeing her kneeling upon the ground, with the wood ready, he did the same, and at that instant, a puff of wind blew out the tiny flame, leaving both in blank darkness again.

"Whew!" whistled the lad, in genuine alarm, "only one match left! If that misses, we're in a pretty scrape."

It would be difficult to imagine the anxiety of the two, as, kneeling close together, and shutting out the wind as much as possible, the last remaining match was struck.

Little Rifle had gathered dry leaves, which caught and burned readily. Others were carefully piled upon them, and by nursing the flame for several minutes, the eyes of the two friends lit up with joy, as they saw a bright, warm, crackling fire blaze up before them.

Then, as it lit up the gloom, Harry could see the signs of a camp having been held upon this spot sometime before. There was an abundance of fuel, and had they possessed blankets, they could not have desired to be more comfortable.

"We shall have more snow to-night," said Little Rifle, looking up to the sky; "there is no moon or stars, and I can feel it in the air."

They broke off branches and limbs, and spreading them upon the ground, made as comfortable lounges as possible under the circumstances; but still, although the day had been warm, there was a growing chilliness in the night air, which made them keep the fire roaring as much as was compatible with safety.

And sitting close together, near this, they renewed and continued their conversation for hours. They talked of the future—Harry painted in rose colors what both were to do, and what happiness was to come to both in the end.

And Little Rifle listened, pleased and charmed, until the voice of the lad grew broken and uncertain, his head drooped, and he finally sunk over upon his bed of twigs and branches, in a sound slumber.

He was awakened by something cold and soft that struck him lightly in the face. Opening his eyes and starting up, he found that the camp-fire had smoldered to ashes; he was cold and chilly, and Little Rifle was gone!

His first proceeding was to start up and throw more wood upon the fire. When he had driven the numbness from his system, he then began to look for the return of Little Rifle, and to wonder what her long absence, as shown by the condition of the camp-fire, meant.

But hour after hour wore away and she came not, while a strange, vague fear stole over the lad, as he called her by name again and again, and no response came.

That which had struck him in the face and awakened him was a snowflake, or rather a score of them, and as he looked about, he saw that the air was full of snow, falling softly and silently, and wrapping the earth in its robe of white.

At last the dull gray morning broke, and still no signs of Little Rifle.

"What can have happened?" exclaimed the distressed Harry. "She is gone! she is lost! I have lost my beautiful Bride of the Wilderness!"

Alas! he spoke the truth!

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